

# The egalitarian body

A study of aesthetic and emotional processes in *massana*  
performances among the Mbendjele of the Likouala region  
(Republic of Congo)

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# Declaration

I, Camille Oloa-Biloa confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. When information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

# Abstract

Egalitarianism is a practice as much as it is an ideology (Woodburn 1982), and several authors highlighted the importance of the use of the body in hunter-gatherers' egalitarian societies as well as the ways political power is framed by a subtle balance between genders (e.g. Biesele 1993; Kisliuk 1998; Finnegan 2013) through embodied performative practice. An important context in which Mbendjele egalitarianism is embodied by individuals is through musical and playful performances obeying the strict rules of the institution *massana*.

In this thesis, I describe these embodied processes with a focus on the role of aesthetics and emotions, to show how egalitarianism is re-created/re-asserted during each *massana* performance. Mbendjele egalitarianism and the role of *massana* in this political system are investigated through an analysis of the processes of embodiment of egalitarian values and behaviour, and of the effect of play, music, dance and emotions on the human body in the Mbendjele context.

This thesis is divided in six chapters. Chapter 1 defines egalitarianism, Mbendjele egalitarianism and the role of *massana* in this political system. Chapter 2 explores the processes of embodiment of egalitarian values and behaviour, and the effect of play, music, dance and emotions on the human body in the Mbendjele context. Chapter 3 investigates the structure of Mbendjele music, and chapter 4 looks at visual aesthetics in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). Chapter 5 focuses on Mbendjele's 'collective body' through a study of gender communication. Chapter 6 shows how Mbendjele achieve beauty and restore harmony through the performance of forest spirit rituals (*mokondi massana*).

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# Glossary of Mbendjele words

**Men forest spirits:** *edʒɛŋgi, bolobe, makuma, Ekāmbaleki, djoboko, Dāmba, makbo, kpamba, so, mobema, mafudia, eki, eniobe, ndele, edio, samali, matisaŋgomba*

**Women forest spirits:** *ŋgɔku, yeli, molimu*

**Children forest spirits:** *mopepe, bolu, esule*

**Children's games:** *anasi, pʃɛmbe, epatipati, elānda, moona kema, babubu, ŋguli, ŋgolio, mokpombo, māŋgbese, iɛmbi,*

bandudu	type of leaves skirt worn by women and <i>bolobe</i> spirits
bekpadja	type of leaves skirt worn by women
bese	all/every
bo.bia	to refuse to share
bo.binedi	to dance
bo. dɪŋge	to like/to love
bo.embedi	to sing
bo.ibedi	to steal
bo.kabwedi	to share
bo.tedi	to see
bolɪŋgo	love
bilo (sing. milo)	non-pygmy farmers
bude	hard
dĩāŋga	women's dance type
digidigi	bolobe spirit's dance movement
djāmba	guide of a song
djoŋgu	<i>Edʒɛŋgi</i> spirit's clothing
edyāŋguma	women's dance movement
ekila	taboo complex
ekuta	traditional leaf hut
enie	beautiful/wise
esɛŋgo	joy, happiness
esime	song phase
game	musical bow
gano	song-stories
gundu	mystical force (resides in the stomach)
kiŋgo	voice/throat
komba	creator of all things

kombeti	elder
konja ua mokondi	spirit-guardian
libongu	litt. 'the waterfront'. in the context of <i>edjengi</i> performances, <i>Libongu</i> is the procession of men carrying <i>edjengi's</i> clothing.
lifulele	bamboo flute
madi mo ndika	palm kernel oil
massana	musical and playful collective activities
matānga	death-related ceremonies (funeral commemoration or lifting of mourning ceremony)
mbānda	polygamous marriage
mbāndjo	men's sitting area
mboni	neophyte
mēndo	issue, problem, business
miso	eye
mobema	forest spirit embodied by the community as a whole
mela	wild yam
mokili	world
mokombe	drum type
mokondi	forest spirit
mokondi ua kiti	evil forest spirit
molimo	spirit
mondume	harp
mongadi	harp-zither
moona (plu. baana)	child
muānda	blood
musōme	red antelope
ndima	forest
ndjo	body
ndumu	drum
njānga	sacred path for initiates
ngānga	traditional healer
ngoye	mother
ngonja	initiated
posa + na	the need of
yoma	food

### **Note on the pronunciation of phonetic letters:**

ng as the ng sound of "fishing"  
 ɲ as in the french gn sound of "agneau"  
 e as in the first e of the french "électrique"  
 ɛ as in the first e of "élephant"  
 ɔ as in the o of "orange"  
 ā as in the french an sound of "blanc"

**Note on the transcription of Mbendjele words:**

Mbendjee is a tone language constituted of three tones (high, medium and low). I chose not to transcribe the tones in this thesis, to protect the reader from a non-linguist's mistakes and approximations.

## List of abbreviations

ROC: Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville)

DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa)

CAR: Central African Republic

FSC: 'forest stewardship council', is an environmental label intended to ensure sustainable forest management.

CIB: Congolaise Industrielle des Bois (timber company)



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# Introduction

“Ethnomusicologists are more fortunate than anthropologists and sociologists because the private feelings we study are publicly expressed in musical performance. Cultural barriers evaporate when musicologist meets musician. There is no substitute in ethnomusicological fieldwork for intimacy born of shared musical experience. Learning to sing, dance, play in the field is good fun and good method.”

Myers 1992: 31

## **Pygmy studies**

Pygmy (and African hunter-gatherer) studies is a large and prolific field of research. Many aspects of Pygmies' lives have been studied since the beginnings of western interest in these populations in the eighteenth century. In this first section, I review some of these studies that are relevant to my research, and show how my work fits in the study of Pygmy populations in general. I will concentrate on authors writing in domains that inspired my work, and describe the models and approaches I use in this thesis.

## **The challenge of names**

All across central Africa live populations –including the Bagyéli, Bongo, Batswa and Bambendjele- which are regrouped under the term ‘Pygmies’, and one cannot study



one of these populations without considering the use of the term “Pygmy”. Bahuchet recently summarized the somewhat awkward situation of Pygmies studies:

“These societies have been, from an early period preceding their physical encounter, artificially brought together by Europeans in a global category, ‘Pygmy’, derived from Greek mythology; that is to say that these groups are inserted by Westerners in a curious representation system, combining ancient tales, imagery of the ‘Noble Savage’, while reflecting the evolution of moral ideas: the defence of oppressed peoples” (Bahuchet 2012b: 5, translation from French my own).

Regardless of their approach, scholars have struggled to find a term which would allow them to group different “Pygmy” populations together. “[The term ‘Pygmy’] is a paradoxical term because it combines a derogatory aspect, implying primitiveness, infantilism, and diminutive characteristics, with a positively valued one of aboriginality, spiritual authenticity and harmony with nature.” (Lewis 2002a: 47). Schweinfurth was the first to use the term “Pygmy” in its modern form in 1878 (*ibid.*), defining them as “the dwarf races of Equatorial Africa” (“les races naines d’Afrique Equatoriale”, Bahuchet 1993a). Some anthropologists have claimed that the term “Pygmy” is irrelevant, and “... appears to be a somehow a misleading category covering different entities, used to designate various kind of rainforest people with a short stature and nomadic life style” (Bahuchet 2006: 1). Others, like Lewis, argue that it is a meaningful and has validity as it represents an emic view of themselves as forest people that these groups share, explicitly recognizing their shared ancestry, lifestyle and cultural values.

Consequently, the word ‘Pygmy’ disappeared from publications, “disgraced as formerly tam-tam, tribe or fetish, as now indigenous or ethnic group. It has been replaced by circumlocutions or uncertain terminology: *chasseurs-cueilleurs*, *chasseurs-collecteurs*, *peuples de la forêt*, hunter-gatherers, foragers, forest peoples, forest dwellers, and recently ‘autochtones’ [indigenous people]” (Robillard & Bahuchet 2012: 16, translation from French my own). These new terms can indeed be questioned. When referring to Pygmy populations as ‘forest people’, one ignores all the non-pygmy populations who also live in the forest. Furthermore, the term ‘autochtone’ seems to carry the same load of approximations as the term ‘Pygmy’ (*ibid.*: 33).

According to Bahuchet (2012a), there is a huge heterogeneity of the societies called “Pygmies”. Some are hunters, other fishermen, others use agriculture. Some groups

live in the rain forest, such as the Kola and the Baka of Cameroon, the Bongo and Koya of Gabon, the Aka of the Republic of Congo (RoC) or the Twa of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while others live in the savannah, like the Medzan of North Cameroon, the Cwa and the Twa of Burundi and Rwanda<sup>1</sup>. But all are former or continue to be forest hunter-gatherers. The Twa of Burundi and Rwanda only live in savannah because the farmers and pastoralists have cut down the forest. Bedzan too, claim to be former forest people and represent forest and forest spirits in the rituals of their *Bilo*.

Further, there is no such thing as a “Pygmy language”, as they all have languages from different linguistic families (some are Bantu languages, others are Oubangian or Sudanic). The linguistic aspect of Pygmies’ identity has been analyzed by Lewis (2008) in his analysis of Mbendjele “communicative culture”, where he argued that Mbendjele (as well as other Central African hunter-gatherers) do not consider the language spoken as a cultural distinctive marker but rather consider the way the language is spoken, and tend to favor musical practices and a forest-oriented life style to identify themselves and other populations. “It makes more sense to consider Mbendjee<sup>2</sup> as ... a tool for establishing and maintaining social relationships with anything and anyone that might respond” (Lewis 2008: 236). The variety of speech styles and languages used by the Mbendjele suggests that language might not be a relevant cultural feature when grouping or separating Central African hunter-gatherers.

For lack of a better word, I will thus use the term ‘Pygmy’ to refer to populations who recognize themselves as Pygmies (or any other word which corresponds to this appellation in their language), in an attempt to consider the group I focus on here in the perspective of the broad family of Central African hunter-gatherers and former hunter-gatherer populations.

While living among the Bagyéli, Bongo, Tswa and Mbendjele, I often heard people pronounce the word ‘Pygmy’ with a lot of pride, which emphasized the good aspects of Pygmy culture such as a highly developed sense of sharing or tremendous skills

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<sup>1</sup> All these groups have been unequally studied, although extensive anthropologic studies have been provided by scholars (e.g. Leclerc 2001, Lewis 2002, Marandola 2003, Robillard 2010, Rupp 2011, Soengas 2009; 2010, Sawada 1990, Waehle 1986).

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I use Lewis’s terminology to distinguish the Mbendjele (the people) and Mbendjee (the language).

in forest life as well as in music and dance. The negative connotations scholars attributed to the term 'Pygmy' are generally attributed to them by non-Pygmies, and not always recognized by Pygmy populations themselves.

I will also use the term 'Yaka' to refer to Pygmy groups (Lewis 2014: 220), as it is the way the Mbendjele themselves call other Pygmy groups. According to Lewis, the term *bayaka* can be considered as an equivalent to the academic term 'Pygmy'. The author demonstrated that the term '*bayaka*' is used by several Pygmy populations (Aka, Baka, Ngombe, Bofi, Luma, Mbendjele, and Mikaya) and can be contracted as *baaka*, or *baka*. The term 'BaYaka' thus emphasizes the dual classification of Bantu and Ubangian languages spoken respectively by the Aka and Baka groups.

To refer to non-Pygmy populations, often called 'Bantu', 'Grand Noirs' or 'village farmers', I use, after Lewis, the term 'bilo', which is a generic Mbendjee word designating non-Pygmy farmers<sup>3</sup>, regardless of whether they speak Bantu or Ubangian languages.

## **Egalitarianism**

Pygmies' egalitarianism has been looked at from several perspectives (Bahuchet 2012b: 9). Japanese researchers developed in Cameroon an economic and biological anthropology mainly based on quantitative data (e.g. Ichikawa & al 2012; Yamauchi & al 2000), while a French team adopted a multi-disciplinary approach for the study of the Aka of Central African Republic (CAR) lead by Thomas and Bahuchet (Thomas & al 1981-2012), and more recently conducted in Cameroon and Gabon (e.g. Billard 2008 ; Bonhomme & al 2012; Fürniss 2011 ; Le Bomin & Mbot 2011, de Ruyter 2003), using recent advances in genetics (Verdu & al 2009). American scholars rather adopted a different anthropological approach, looking closely at individual's development, education, apprenticeship and inter-generational transmission (e.g. Hewlett and Hewlett 2008; Meehan 2005), while English language scholars studied the ritual and religious aspects of Aka life (Kisliuk 1998; Finnegan 2008; Lewis 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> The *bilo* living in villages along the Motaba River are Bondongo and Kaka populations.

Nowadays, around 17 Pygmy populations are known (Robillard & Bahuchet 2012: 18), and yet several groups are still under-studied. “Pygmies, despite the old interest scholars extended them, which dates back centuries, are still known in a very fragmented way. If some groups have been the subject of a wide literature, several others are very poorly documented, some even not at all” (Bahuchet 2012b: 6, translation from French my own).

A large part of ethnographic publications concern the Yaka populations of the CAR and the RoC. The Baka of Cameroon, Efe and Mbuti of the DRC have also been studied, while all the other Pygmy groups lack extended documentation (*ibid*). “Major gaps still exist, particularly in the various communities called Cwa or Twa, in the centre and south of Congo, or on the mysterious groups of southern Angola, of which we know little since Father Carlos Estermann visited them before 50s” (*ibid*: 8, translation from French my own). As I will develop in the following section, my PhD research primarily aimed to fill this gap by delivering new data on the Tswa of the DRC. Unfortunately, I contracted malaria and dysentery while doing fieldwork in DRC, and had to shorten my stay. I will include the little data I collected in the DRC whenever possible in this thesis, but my main focus is on the Mbendjele of the RoC.

My analysis of Mbendjele egalitarianism follows previous writings on hunter-gatherers. The first studies on African hunter-gatherers suffered from a Rousseauian notion of natural and cultural purity (Barnard 1983), with late nineteenth century’s authors depicting these groups as tribal, isolated and with primitive social organization, struggling to survive. Schebesta was the first to provide a quality study of a Pygmy group (the Efe of the DRC) in the 1930s, and was concerned with Christian debates on the universality of monotheism (1936). Then the 1966 “Man the Hunter” conference “laid the foundations” of the anthropological study of modern hunter-gatherers (Bird-David 1992: 25). The paper Sahlins presented during the conference (“The Original Affluent Society”) became a classic text in the field of anthropology and inspired scholars in the study of the economical organisation of hunter-gatherers. Sahlins built on ethnographic studies (e.g. Turnbull 1961) to assert two cultural propositions. The first is the idea that *affluence* is a culture-specific relation between material wants and means. “For there are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be ‘easily satisfied’ either by producing much or by desiring little” (Sahlins 1968: 96). Hunter-gatherers have limited possessions and do not

store, but they do not 'lack' anything because their material wants are few and easily satisfied.

The second proposition is built on the idea that a successful economy is one in which people maintain a livelihood with a low ratio of work time to leisure time. Sahlins claimed that hunter-gatherers' economy is successful because people devote a relatively small amount of time to work (three to five hours a day). The legitimacy of his claim has been questioned by more recent quantitative studies on several hunter-gatherer populations which showed that Sahlins's figures were grounded on unreliable data (Bird-David 1992: 25-26). Sahlins nonetheless attracted hunter-gatherer scholars' attention towards a culturally oriented approach of hunter-gatherers' economic behaviour. The dynamics of the food quest, sharing and exchange had to be considered from an emic point of view, enlightened by cultural rules and conceptualizations.

This thesis contributes to the scholarship of egalitarianism by focusing on the ritual and playful mechanisms that maintain egalitarianism in Mbendjele society. Mbendjele's material and non-material wants are studied and show the existence of an emotional economy on which the success of the food economy is dependent. The ethnography focuses on the rather neglected area of the sharing of emotions, and highlights the significance of sharing emotionally for establishing the group as a solid social unit.

Scholars working on sharing in hunter-gatherer societies have privileged the study of food and material goods rather than the study of emotions. Yet the insights of three scholars are used to frame the analysis of sharing practices among the Mbendjele. First, Woodburn's model of *immediate-* and *delayed-return* societies, second Lewis's ethnography of Mbendjele's ritual economy and third Widlock's sharing theory.

According to Woodburn, the main characteristics of egalitarianism among Pygmies are a strong social and ideological imperative to share, a direct access to material resources, a sharing of knowledge and skills by all members of the community, a relative gender and age equality and an unparalleled degree of individual autonomy and freedom of movements (Woodburn 1980).

Woodburn focused on the egalitarian mode of social organization and created new theoretical models to categorize societies and allow selective comparisons. His typology distinguishes two types of economic systems, the *immediate-return* system and the *delayed-return* system. The *immediate-return* system is based on individual access to resources, generalized sharing, and strong social control which prevents individuals from controlling or accumulating goods. Referring to the Hadza, Woodburn explains that “encumbrances are unacceptable and people do not take on even short-term commitments which might provide a few additional days of desirable food” (Woodburn 1980: 100). *Delayed-return* systems are characterized by the accumulation of property and of surplus. Woodburn’s typology reveals that only *immediate-return* systems allow an egalitarian social organization.

Mbendjele society can be categorized as immediate-return and egalitarian according to Woodburn’s typology. Lewis argued that “the difference between immediate- and delayed-return societies goes well beyond economics to determine key aspects of social structure and political organization” (Lewis 2014: 222). The author refers here to the accumulation of goods, which, in delayed-return societies, inevitably creates inequalities between individuals, and leads to individuals manipulating their privileged access to key resources to gain authority over others who depend on those resources. In contrast, “people in immediate-return societies do not depend on specific others for access to food, land, resources, or tools and so can move easily should they so wish. In these societies pressure is not put on people to produce, but on them to share whatever they have produced” (*ibid.*). Sharing has been described by Woodburn then Lewis as a defining feature of the immediate-return societies’ social and political organisation.

Lewis described in great detail the religious and ritual practices of Mbendjele communities, and identified the existence of an “economy of joy” most manifest during forest spirit performances (2015). The analysis of men’s initiation and of men’s forest spirit performances (2002) allowed me to grasp aspects of Mbendjele society which, as a woman, I had difficulty accessing. Similarly, Lewis’s analysis of the Mbendjele system of taboo (*ekila*) enriched my analysis by providing detailed ethnographic descriptions on aspects of the Mbendjele culture which are rarely expressed verbally in casual discussions or formal interviews (2008). The detailed nature of Lewis’s work enabled regional comparison to be made, and highlighted the

distinctiveness of some practices observed in Bonguinda and described in this thesis.

From Widlok's theory of sharing, this thesis uses two main cultural propositions. The first concerns the notion of value, and the second the idea that co-presence influences the act of sharing. Building on Woodburn's argument that sharing is not a form of reciprocity (1998), Widlok showed through ethnographic examples that among hunter-gatherer populations "sharing is not a form of reciprocity because it does not lend itself to the creation of obligations for future transfers nor is it likely to even out over time" (2004: 62). Further, the value attributed to the act of sharing has more to do with "remaining on good terms with the others" than with the relative value of the item shared (Widlok 2013: 24-25).

While sharing does not imply reciprocity, it is different from the act of giving based on the ethics of generosity. In the context of immediate-return societies, sharing occurs mostly on demand, and individuals deploy strategies such as hiding or lying to avoid sharing, which proves the inadequacy of connecting the act of sharing with ethics of generosity in a hunter-gatherer context (Widlok 2004: 62). In Widlok's terms, sharing is "enabling access to what is valued for its own sake" (2004: 63). This thesis focuses on the ways the Mbendjele promote, value and share specific emotional states. The analysis provided builds on Widlok's definition of sharing to discuss the sharing of valued social production. In addition, Widlok pointed out that kin ties, talk and bodily presence have a significant influence on the act of sharing. "We need to recognize that one's mere bodily presence, underlined by addressing the other person in particular ways, is always a demand for being acknowledged as a partner, a personal being with legitimate needs" (2013: 21). The ethnography presented in this thesis uses Widlok's "modes of corporeal presence" (*ibid.*: 22) to frame the analysis of the collective sharing of emotions and to demonstrate the significance of sharing emotionally for establishing the group as a solid social unit.

## **Sharing emotions**

Sharing has thus been shown to be one of the key features of Mbendjele's economy and egalitarianism. In this thesis, I will provide more detailed ethnography of sharing

as it relates to the domains of collective emotions, performance and play, that have not been studied with the same attention as economic relations. The sharing of emotions and feelings have not received the attention they deserve despite this being a central area of concern to the people themselves. The sharing of emotions and feelings during collective activities and in everyday life is discussed by the Mbendjele and considered to be one of the community's pillars.

Performance studies provided interesting insights about the sharing of emotions during music and dance performances. Brenneis highlighted the fact that “performers are helping to construct a shared emotional impression for the audience” (Brenneis 1987: 240), emphasizing that the non-verbal domain is a privileged way to share emotions. Despite the manifest display of powerful emotions during collective activities such as religious rituals, scholars working on Pygmy populations have rarely focused on the emotional context of these performances (Lewis 2002 and 2015 are exceptions).

During my time in the village of Bonguinda (RoC), I investigated Mbendjele emotions and feelings, building on Leavitt's argument that “it is perfectly possible to play on one's own and one's reader's emotions to attempt to convey those of the people under study, not only in their meanings but also in their feelings” (Leavitt 1996: 518). Indeed, Leavitt argued that “while we do not know what someone else is feeling, this is true only in the same sense that we do not know absolutely what someone else means when he or she says something. In both cases, we interpret” (*ibid.*: 529). Emotions -and the broader category of embodied knowledge- can be studied even if many anthropologists carefully stay away from these subjects. Like Farnell, I wonder “why, in a discipline that defines itself by a holistic approach, do systematic analyses of dynamically embodied knowledge only rarely find their way into ethnographic representations, and thus into the academy?” (Farnell 1999: 344)

Some authors have described the importance of emotions to the Mbendjele as produced by performing ritual. Lewis describes the forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) as an ‘economy of joy’ (Lewis 2015). In this thesis, I develop these preliminary observations to look at broader processes by which the community manage difficult emotions, heal damaged emotions and produce and share positively valued emotions.



In order to study the circulation, sharing and management of emotions I focus on these key areas of evidence: ritual performance, what people say during these performances about desirable and positive emotions and how these are cultivated and shared, what they describe as negative emotions and how they seek to transform them into more positive ones, how they transmit to the next generation the value of positive emotions and the techniques of emotional sharing.

Building on Perkins (1972), Leavitt argued that “emotion is, while intimately felt, also both communicated to others and shared by groups” (Leavitt 1996: 527). During my fieldwork, I learned Mbendjee in order to communicate verbally. I also learned to communicate non-verbally with my body in an Mbendjele way by dancing, weaving, cooking, carrying things or walking. Leavitt showed that “empathic recognition is part of human interaction ... such empathy, while perfectly real, is not an end to understanding but the beginning of the search” (*ibid.*: 530). My participation in Mbendjele’s activities increased my awareness of bodily sensations such as the exhaustion after gathering yams a whole day or singing for eight hours, the back ache from carrying fresh fish back to camp and the itching of the throat tired of singing after a long ritual. Everyday life activities helped me to shape my movements in ways more atune to Mbendjele cultural norms. I used the insights I gathered through participation to better interpret the emotions of individuals and groups as they are expressed.

Scholars from the anthropology of dance have already highlighted the importance of emotions in embodied actions such as dance. Strengthening Parkin’s argument (Parkin 1985), Neveu pointed out that “dance, as a non-verbal, creative activity involving a ‘moving together’ of reason, emotion and body ... allows us to grasp aspects of sociality which are not easily put into words” (Neveu 2005: 17). In Mbendjele collective activities, emotions are largely displayed and can be deciphered with a body-informed cultural knowledge of movement and expression. I learnt during fieldwork some of the cultural facial and body expressions of emotions such as joy, anger or surprise, which allowed me to interpret people’s actions and reactions in relation to the emotions they expressed (through dance or musical acts). The analysis presented in this thesis also includes people’s discussions on emotions, reactions to the display of emotions, and ways to express emotions verbally. Both verbal and non-verbal expressions of emotions are analysed to show

how emotions participate to the dynamics of sharing in Mbendjele society, and how ritual and musical performances enable and shape the proper sharing of positive emotions throughout the community.

### **A common cultural foundation**

Even though I focus on the Mbendjele in this thesis, egalitarianism as practice is widely spread among central African Pygmy populations. Heated debates have animated scholars with some arguing that Pygmies populations can be compared while others refuted this. Lewis & Köhler (2002: 278) reminded us that “there are many different groups of Central Africa forest hunter-gatherers and former hunter-gatherers that are referred to as Pygmies, but each has its own history, its own name, area of forest and particular current situation, as well as high levels of intra-cultural variation.” A recurrent question in Pygmies studies is thus: do all these different groups living in different places but regrouped under the same name have anything in common?

Gender studies gave interesting clues about the similarity of gender relationships among African hunter-gatherers since authors such as Turnbull (1961), Kisliuk (1998) or Lewis (2002) highlighted the importance of women’s power in these societies. Finnegan’ study of BaYaka understanding of power, sex and rituals showed that the tension created by sexual differences is transcended in Central African Pygmy societies, and that this antagonism is necessary and positive (2010).

Lewis reported the similarities as identified by Hewlett between Pygmy groups: “spending at least four months a year hunting and gathering in the forest; strongly identifying with and preferring forest life; contrasting the ‘forest world’ to the ‘village world’; having economies based on demand-sharing; practicing important rituals associated with elephant hunting; having intimate parent-child relations; and diverse relationships with neighboring farming groups.” Lewis’ own set of similarities between Pygmy groups differs slightly from Hewlett’s: “there are underlying structural

and cultural similarities in music, a predatory and mimetic language style (Lewis 2009), ritual structures (Lewis 2002, 2015), identification with a forest hunter-gatherer lifestyle, a gendered division of labor based on the symbolism of blood (Ichikawa 1987; Lewis 2008), economies based on demand-sharing, egalitarian social organisation, and their status as the ‘first people’ of the region” (Lewis 2014: 220).

The management of emotions has rarely been considered by scholars to be a distinctive trait of Pygmy culture, and yet ethnographic evidence shows that collective performances are enabled by the institutionalized sharing of emotions between all members of the community. Research in child development provided useful clues to the importance of emotions in Pygmy communities as Hewlett (2014: 248) pointed out that “physical and emotional proximity are particularly important to forest hunter-gatherers.”

## **Pygmy Music**

Despite the scarcity of writings on dance or emotions, ethnomusicologists brought to light interesting features of Pygmies’ performances in terms of musical structure. Studies made by Turnbull (1961), then by Demolin highlighted the principal characteristics of Mbuti musical practices, especially Efe polyphony (Demolin 1993). Arom, followed by Fūrniiss, studied Aka music in great detail. These two ethnomusicologists highlighted the main principles which underlie this group’s polyrhythm and polyphony, and made an inventory of the different Aka repertoires and musical instruments (Arom 1981, 1983, 1985, 1991a; Arom & Fūrniiss 1992; Fūrniiss 1993, 1999, 2006, 2012, 2014). Fūrniiss made a thorough study of musical scales (Fūrniiss 1991a, 1992, 2000), and of Aka vocal techniques (Fūrniiss 1991b, 1991c). Kisliuk worked among the Aka too, and studied choreography and musical performances (Kisliuk 1997, 1998), while Dehoux studied the relationship between hunting, sexuality and music (Dehoux & Henri 1995). Lewis adopted an anthropological point of view to describe Mbendjele’s ritual practices and representations, taking into account the importance of singing and dancing in this society (Lewis 2002, 2013). Baka music has been well studied too, from different

perspectives, notably on dancing (Bundo 2001; Sawada 2001; Tsuru 1998), and also feminine musical repertoires (Fürniss 2005, 2008).

Bahuchet and Thomas were the first to lead a comparative study of these different Pygmy groups, through an ethno-ecological and ethno-linguistic approach (Bahuchet & Thomas 1986; Bahuchet 1992). Their comparative study of the Aka and the Baka highlighted a common history between these two groups, which would have been one people about 500 years ago (Bahuchet 1992, 1993b). Other comparative studies have been made between different Pygmy and Bushman groups, notably Fürniss and Olivier's work, which compares the different conceptions of Aka and Ju'hoan vocal music (Fürniss & Olivier 1997).

These monographic and comparative studies, made on different Central African Pygmy groups, suggested the existence of a "Pygmy style", characterized by the singing without words, the yodel technique, vocal polyphony, an absence of melodic instruments, the existence of ephemeral instruments, a specific voice tone and common rhythmic formulae (Arom & Dehoux 1978). Arom showed that these characteristics are shared by all Central African Pygmy groups, yet many differences can be found between these groups, in addition to a high degree of intra-cultural diversity.

Scholars raised the possibility that the key features that connect different hunter-gatherers groups of Central Africa together are their shared sense of aesthetics (Kisliuk 1999, Lewis 2013). What might be more important for them is not the content, but the form. To them, it does not matter what kind of tool they use, if they fish or hunt, what shape they give to their huts, etc., but how they sound. As both Lewis (2013: 53) and I have noticed, if a group of "Pygmies" listen to the singing of another group of "Pygmies", they recognize themselves: "they must be us, because they sing like us". The acoustic image of several Pygmy groups' music has been shown to be remarkably similar from one group to another.

As Feld pointed out, "... the basis for comparing the social life of sounds must be qualitative and derived from intense local research... Such comparisons can be framed in general domains that do not over-simplify the culturally specific dimensions of sociomusical reality" (Feld 1984: 385). Following this, I study music as a "total social fact" (*ibid.*) which necessitate putting the musical object in perspective with

other domains of the performance. The egalitarian way of performing music goes further beyond the music produced and has its roots in the practice of producing music. “In such [egalitarian] societies, what we call music-dance-ritual-religion-ecology seem to be fused into nearly one homeostatic system, symbolizing nothing or everything” (Keil 1979: 1).

I use musical notation in my analysis of Mbendjele performances, in order to enrich the ethnomusicological corpus of Pygmy songs and rhythms. I aim at enlarging opportunities for comparative studies of central African Pygmies and I provide evidence of Pygmy's resilience in time and space. However, even though I study dance as part of the performance, I decided not to use body movement notation in this thesis, because I focus here on the social meanings attached to body movements rather than on the dialectics of gesture or the process of realizing a written choreography.

### **The power of performance and play**

Scholars in performance studies privilege a focus on embodied practices (non-verbal) rather than narratives (verbal), and consider embodied practices as “important systems of knowing and transmitting knowledge” (Taylor 2003:26). This approach echoes a theory on the role of the body in cognition developed in the field of cognitive sciences. The “embodiment thesis” states that “cognition deeply depends on aspects of the agent's body other than the brain” (Wilson & Foglia forthcoming). In that sense, talking about an “embodied experience” highlights the dependency of the brain on the experience lived by the body (its actions and interactions with its cultural and ecological environment), and on the “significant causal role” played by the “beyond the brain body” (*ibid.*). The embodiment thesis is one of the frames I use in my analysis of Mbendjele behaviour as I focus on embodied experiences in rituals. The experiences of singing, dancing and sharing emotions are rooted in the “beyond-the-brain body”, and actively influence individuals' system of thoughts and cognitive processes (such as space and time). The non-verbal nature of embodied experiences which lay at the core of Mbendjele's practice of play (*massana*) that includes spirit play ritual appeal for an analysis considering the body as an active element of cognition.

One important avenue for the transmission of egalitarianism among Pygmy populations is through active participation in rituals, and several scholars such as Blacking, Sager or Whitehouse demonstrated that embodied experiences lived during a ritual can have a great impact on an individual's personal and social life. Whitehouse claimed that, in Papua New Guinea, the promotion of memorable experience within a ritual has an impact on everyday religious activities (Whitehouse 1995). The experience of performing is sometimes better remembered than the symbolism of a ritual performance (Blacking 1985a). As Blacking emphasized, music and dance have the power to motivate people for action, and therefore are potentially powerful. "Music can be used for all sorts of social and political purposes... [but] it is only affecting and effective as music when it is internalized as a bodily response to a set of cultural symbols" (Blacking 1983: 52).

Sager argued after Blacking that "the emotional tie resulting from the intense pleasure of transcendent experience serves as a primary force motivating the individual to act on behalf of those institutions that facilitated the experience" (Sager 2006: 147). Music and dance performances in ritual can be considered as social tools, since people's commitment to a group is reinforced by the impact of music on their senses (Sager 2006). Grauer stressed that music operates as a 'conservative force' (Grauer 2007: 4), reaffirming the individual's connection to the group, and one might then argue that this process is made possible through the action of performing an embodied experience.

In this thesis, I build on the idea proposed by the authors quoted above that the embodied experiences lived by individuals and groups during rituals play an active role in the shaping of the religious, economical and political systems of a given society. Through the study of embodied practices in an Mbendjele community, this thesis shows how the dynamics of non-material sharing establish the group as a solid social unit through the management of emotions at a collective level.

Research in psychology has given interesting insights concerning the role of play and humour in embodied experiences. The effectiveness with which Mbendjele (and other Pygmy populations) transmit cultural traits with little use of formal teaching has been pointed out by several scholars, notably by Hewlett in his excellent studies of

Pygmies' childhoods and cultural transmission (e.g. Hewlett & Cavalli-sforza 1986; Hewlett & al 2011; Hewlett 2014)... According to Gray,

“play and humour lay at the core of hunter-gatherer social structures and mores. Play and humour were not just means of adding fun to their lives. They were means of maintaining the band's existence—means of promoting actively the egalitarian attitude, extensive sharing, and relative peacefulness for which hunter-gatherers are justly famous and upon which they depended for survival.” (Gray 2009: 477).

Such research showed that play is a privileged tool for the transmission of egalitarian values and rules among hunter-gatherer populations.

## **Fieldwork among Pygmy populations in Central Africa**

### **The research experience and practice**

I first became interested in Pygmies as an undergraduate in anthropology. At that time, I was fascinated by the relationship populations maintain with their environment. Being French on my mother's side and Cameroonian on my father's side, the difference in the way Europeans and Central Africans would interact with their environment had always interested me. While looking at different populations across Central Africa, I came across a text on the Baka of Cameroon. This stirred my interest, and I started to listen to BaYaka music, such as the ethnomusicologist Simha Arom's edited CDs of astonishing songs by the Aka of CAR. I have dedicated the last 10 years to this project.

My project to study Pygmies of Central Africa necessitated skills in both anthropology and music. By listening to a single song produced by Bayaka Pygmies, one realises how sophisticated their musical knowledge must be to achieve such tremendous musical quality. Luckily, my mother is a music teacher, and it was always important to her that all her children learn how to play an instrument. I chose the violin, and dedicated a lot of time in my childhood to musical practice. In addition to individual classes, I attended a musical secondary school. During four years, in addition to the usual school programme, I followed a course of music theory and

participated in weekly orchestra rehearsals. The school orchestra was composed of 80 students, 50 in the orchestra and 30 in the choir. We performed twice a year at the city's theatre. I also followed classes at the conservatory: individual classes with a violin teacher as well as chamber music and weekly orchestra rehearsals. We would perform three times a year in different venues. I kept playing the violin in high school, until I got to a very honourable level both in violin practice and musical theory in classical music. All in all, from the age of six to the age of 21, I intensely practiced music and performed, enjoying every bit of it.

It thus seemed very natural to me to turn toward ethnomusicology once I finished my MSc in anthropology. Influenced by the work of Susanne Färniss, Simha Arom, Serge Bahuchet, Miriam Roving Olsen and others, I discovered a whole new world that seemed very intriguing and very familiar at the same time. I spent two years studying the Bagyéli of South-west Cameroon, including two periods of fieldwork of one and two months (Oloa-Bilola 2011; 2015). During my time in Cameroon studying the impact of sedentarization on Bagyéli's musical and ritual practices, I realized how important the environment and its corresponding semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life was for the perpetuation of this musical culture. When working for UNICEF in the South of RoC, which involved three weeks of fieldwork, I also noticed the destructive effect of urbanisation and deforestation on Bongo Pygmies' society. I felt the need to compare what I had seen in Cameroon and the RoC with a situation in which Pygmies were relatively free to choose their way of life and to stay in the forest if they so wished. My intuition was that Pygmy groups would have a more resilient culture, and a much richer set of ritual and musical practices.

Supported by a Leverhume scholarship, I started a PhD supervised by Jerome Lewis at University College London (UCL). My original goal was to travel to the Equateur region of the DRC in order to find not yet studied Pygmy groups that maintain a forest-oriented way of life, and study their ritual and musical practices. Jerome had heard rumours about such Pygmy groups in the area, even though no recent writings could be found. The political situation has always been precarious in DRC since the country obtained its independence from Belgium in 1960 (Van Reybrouck 2012). The almost total absence of transport infrastructure in some central regions of the country and the constant threat and danger of consecutive civil-wars put off scholars from doing fieldwork in the more remote parts of the country. If one looks at a map of



Pygmy groups in Central Africa<sup>4</sup>, a large empty patch lays between the Aka in the West, the Mbuti in the East and the Twa in the South. The area being covered by dense tropical forest, it seems logical that Pygmy groups would live there.

Yet when I arrived in Equateur, I was soon disillusioned. In five months I walked about 200km through the forest, visiting 13 Batswa Pygmy villages (see figure 1). All of them were sedentarized, and lived in the middle of industrial forestry concessions. The very high population density was due to consecutive waves of refugees fleeing conflicts from eastern regions (Kivu and Haut-Zaïre) that put a lot of pressure on the forest. The Batswa Pygmies rely on agriculture and manioc is their main source of food. The neighbouring *Bilo* imposed a sedentarization policy on Pygmies, “Les Premiers Citoyens” (The First Citizens as the Zairian State labelled them) based on European notions of social evolution since the 1970s. As a result, all the villages I visited were populated by fully sedentarized Batswa Pygmies. People would spend their evenings listening to commercial songs given for free on SD cards by a beer brand (*Primus*). I could not find a good interpreter to work with as I refused to work with a *Bilo* translator (I explain the reasons of this choice later in this chapter). I did my best to learn Tswa, but I was soon discouraged when I faced the plethora of languages spoken in the area. When leaving one village and arriving in another, people were speaking different languages, or the same language but influenced by the neighbouring *Bilo* languages in such a way that I could not understand the little I had previously learnt. Tswa, Bofoto, Lotoa, Lingala and Mongo; I was lost in languages. I had difficulties interviewing people about ritual practices. I managed to get a few recordings of whatever people could remember of their childhoods, though most of the time I did not know what the songs meant.

I could see that church had had a big influence on these Pygmy populations. Indeed, a group of Christian American missionaries had stayed in one Tswa area (in the villages of Loindji, Dondengo and Iuwé) for several visits (in 1994, 1995, 1999 and 2012). They had obviously had a great influence on Batwa’s beliefs: every Sunday, Batswa people, especially women, would go to the church, in their own village or in neighbouring *Bilo* villages. Church songs are easily recognisable and I could hear the influence of the church song style in children games and people’s singing. Apart

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congo\\_Pygmies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congo_Pygmies)

from moments during which I explicitly asked people to sing something they could remember from their own culture, I never heard any traditional song, only Congolese pop music and strongly church influenced songs. Sedentarization and Christianisation have thus had, as in many other Pygmy groups, a destructive impact on Batswa's musical practices.

The Batswa were living as sedentarized farmers just like their *Bilo* neighbours, however. I could see a clear distinction between the way Batswa were organised and the way their *Bilo* neighbours were. Even if in every Tswa village there was a Tswa chief (usually a young man, a good hunter who was married with small children), his power was very limited. The position of chief in the Tswa villages I visited did not seem to induce any kind of authority over others. Rather Batswa chiefs were people regarded as 'good men' in the moral sense of the word, as good examples for children to follow. Interestingly, while the concept of a village's chief is of *Bilo* origin and consists, among other things, of making yourself available to villagers as much as possible, Batswa always chose someone who had a very forest-oriented life style as a chief. In one village that I visited (Mpété), I did not have the chance to see the chief who was hunting in the forest. He knew I was there and stayed for more than two weeks, yet he did not cancel his hunting trip and turn back to welcome me. This non welcome was so out of keeping with farmers' local custom that the *Bilo* chief of the neighbouring village tried to convince Batswa villagers to elect a new chief, because the current chief was not doing his job properly. The Batswa ignored the *Bilo* chief's comments, and seemed very happy about their organisation. He did not intervene too much in people's lives unless they specifically asked him for help, which suited them very well.

The second thing that struck me in Tswa villages was the status and power of women as a gender. Whereas in the *Bilo* villages I visited men were in charge, in neighbouring Batswa villages women systematically handled negotiations with me and decided as a group of what I should or should not do during my stay. Men were present and gave their opinions but they were not able to take decisions on their own for the whole community. These features of Tswa life suggest a post-egalitarian society which, without being strictly egalitarian, presents egalitarian traits that surface in the organisation of everyday life.

Unfortunately I became ill, and the absence of any medical structure in the area forced me to shorten my trip and to go back to Kinshasa for treatment. I was exhausted and slowly realizing that I would not be able to continue working in DRC. At that time, the country was in the tail-end of civil war and I could not take the risk to travel on my own in isolated areas any longer. After discussing with my supervisor, we agreed that it would be safer and more interesting for me to change plans, and to go to the Mbendjele of the RoC instead. Luckily enough, Jerome was on his way to Brazzaville shortly after I had arrived in Kinshasa. I crossed the Congo River and we headed to the Likouala region of The RoC. Jerome introduced me to the staff of a forestry company, the CIB (Congolaise Industrielle des Bois), and advised me on a few Mbendjele villages that were known for their musical skills. I thus first went to the village of Bangui-Motaba, but was soon asked to leave as people realized I did not intend to employ people on a daily basis. I learnt then that a French TV programme (*“C’est Pas Sorcier”*) had done a special show on the Mbendjele and honey collection just a year before my arrival. They had paid people very generous amounts of money, and people thus expected me to pay them as much. Just like the presenter of *C’est Pas Sorcier*, I was white and wanted to know more about Mbendjele culture, but I could not afford to pay them as much as they were asking. As we could not come to a compromise, I left their forest.

I therefore went to another village, Bonguinda. On my arrival, I realized that there were not many people around as most of the houses were empty. I asked if there was a forest camp I could visit nearby, and people took me to a forest camp called Mokakwa, Nyemu’s camp. I instantly got on well with Nyemu and his wife Ai. After a few days, I already felt like I was part of the family as Nyemu kept presenting me as “his daughter” (*moona āngamu*) to every visitors. In this camp, I felt a quietness that I had not felt since I had left London. We stayed two months in Mokakwa without consuming a single agricultural product and spent our days gathering wild yams and edible leaves, looking for honey or hunting. Despite the small number of people in the camp (8 adults and 10 children) music was everywhere. It was the first time I experienced living with a Pygmy group without the omnipresence of *Bilo* and the difference of atmosphere was striking. After two months, Nyemu told me that we had to go back to Bonguinda to celebrate the lifting of mourning ceremony (*matānga*) for Ai’s nephew Roger. I spent a few more weeks in Bonguinda before going back to

Europe as I had originally planned. The high diversity of musical performances I saw and participated in during the three months I spent with the Mbendjele convinced me to focus my attention on this particular group. My musical background somehow conditioned me to follow my ears and I could not resist the Mbendjele's music.

Returning to the RoC two months later, I spent a year with the Mbendjele of Bonguinda between August 2013 and July 2014, taking shelter in Nyemu and Ai's camp. Because I was getting on so well with Nyemu and Ai, and also because I could see that they were both respected in their community (people would describe them as being *moto monie*, litt. "beautiful persons" – i-e wise and good people), I decided to remain with them throughout my stay. I followed them on all their trips, in fishing camps or in *Bilo* villages, in hunting camps and in far away villages for lifting of mourning ceremonies or funerals. Nyemu and Ai have seven children: Mwasi, Annie, Tokabé, Niesi, Thomas, Angé and Lendi, and they all live with their parents. In Nyemu's household also live Ai's mother Mateke, Ai's sister Mélanie and Mélanie's son Roger. Most of the time, we would all move camp together. Nyemu was also very close to his brothers (Petibar, Licao and Monoi), and sisters (Nyatoba and Sému). Often, Nyemu would live in camps with one or several of his brothers and sisters. I spent most of my time in Bonguinda within one extended family, living the rhythm of their lives. Being considered as 'Nyemu and Ai's daughter' granted me with a clear status which helped me to define my relationships with Bonguinda's other inhabitants. From that position, I became integrated in the community and I adopted, as closely as I could, Mbendjele's way of behaving with close family, in-laws, distant relatives, neighbours, and friends. With this status in mind, I learnt how to behave with people in various situations, and it helped me to understand the mechanisms and processes of an egalitarian community.

During the first weeks of my stay in Bonguinda, I felt that I had to learn more about people's everyday lives before I could begin to understand their conceptualizations of music and religion. I had a sense of what forest life is like thanks to my experiences in Cameroon, the South of the RoC and DRC, but I still had a lot to learn. I did my best to learn Mbendjee (the Mbendjele language) as well as many things women –and sometimes men- would do, like looking for honey or setting up traps for porcupines, monkeys or wild pigs. Nyemu has been a great teacher, and

always made sure I had time to write everything he taught me in my notebook. Ata, a grand-mother of Nyemu's clan taught me how to weave marantaceae (*ngongo*) stalks into sleeping mats (*litoko*) and small curved mats used to prepare food (*etunde*). To weave my own mat, I first had to learn how to find marantaceae and how to choose the stalks that would make a good mat, before cutting them in the right way. I had to learn how to remove the flesh of the plant to keep only the skin, before drying it and giving it a flat shape. I learnt how to find the narrow liana (*limbi*) to weave the borders of the mat and finalize it. In the same way I weaved my own basket (*ikwa*), this time made of hard and spiky lianas (*macao*), pieces of a tree's bark (*kol*) and liana's skin (*gbpung-gbu*) spliced into long and narrow laces. I had many skills to master before being able to make my own.

I learnt to detect edible leaves (*koko*) in the dense omnipresent green of the rainforest, and to spot the thin hairy ends of wild yams' stalks (*mea, toko, ekule, ngange, iboko, efa*). I learnt the right time to gather different sorts of fruits (*bambu, mobei, madame, ekamu, mosongo*), edible seeds (*bofusa, payo, kana, fongi, moba, godjo, endeende, likenye, kaso, moleka*) and mushrooms (*makombo: dzingo, mboloko*). I followed men and assisted them as best I could when looking for honey or visiting traps. I helped women to take care of their babies while they were busy. I learnt how to cook, which again implied several skills I was not familiar with, such as how to grate manioc leaves (*djabuka*) on a spiky liana (*ebo*), how to arrange properly the fire wood to obtain a steady stewing, how to wash and cut wild yams fish or meat were necessary for my survival as well as for my understanding of Mbendjele's lives. I could have paid people to do all these things for me, but I wanted to experience Mbendjele life with my whole body if I wanted to understand Mbendjele people's lives.

In the mean time, musical and dance performances were held every three or four days, and I had to learn how to clap hands in rhythm, how to sing and how to dance. Learning how to sing a song was for me very similar to learning how to weave a mat. I had to learn the melodies and their different vocal parts, but also how to go from one part to the other, how to improvise, how to sing in the call-and-response style (*esime*), how to begin and end a song properly. Through participant observation during fieldwork, I shared personal experiences which shaped my understanding of Mbendjele culture. As Tedlock emphasized, "the ongoing nature of fieldwork

connects important personal experiences with an area of knowledge; as a result, it is located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis” (Tedlock 2003: 165).

What I experienced and embodied personally became part of my data. By experiencing dancing, singing and playing instruments, I gained a particular insight into musical practices, and I used my own experiences to inform my analysis. What ones feels during a performance is as relevant as what ones plays; by participating with my body in music and dance practices, I gained specific types of information that could not be accessed otherwise. As Crosby notes concerning dance practices, “the felt dimensions of cultural movement knowledge are as important as the objective view of movement. A focus on product alone risks surface interpretations and a placing of static boundaries around artistic form and the culturally shared meanings that bring the product into being” (Crosby 1997: 67). Several ethnomusicologists such as Seeger argued that music is both composed of emotion, value, structure and form (Seeger 1987). Thus the emotional content of a performance has to be studied and analyzed, which is only achievable through participant observation.

According to Bloch (1998), cultural knowledge is mostly acquired non-verbally, “by repeated observation and imitation without the intervention of explicit statements” (Widdess 2012: 88). Only repeated practice can enable one to learn different aspects of a culture, and musical practice is a way to learn *without the intervention of explicit statements*. Learning to perform is a relevant method to understand the ways through which cultural knowledge is transmitted. Further, “the technical problems that arise in learning to perform may also be very revealing about the *ergonomics* of the music, showing how it fits the human sensori-motor system and the instrument’s morphology” (Bailey 2001). By submitting myself to a learning process, I also got interesting insights about the methods and institutions for musical training. As Bailey shows, “the way a musician teaches is likely to reflect the way that person learned in the first place” (*ibid.*: 94). Additionally, after spending some time learning I was able to perform to a reasonable standard in collective performances. By participating in as many performances as I could and by becoming initiated to *Dgɔku* and *Yele mokondi* of the women’s tradition, I got a privileged access from the inside, and was able to better understand the participants’ interactions and roles. Furthermore, “...it can

provide one with an understandable role and status in the community... It explains why you are here and what you are doing" (*ibid.*: 95). My fieldwork in the RoC has thus been a long apprenticeship that is far from being completed. Nevertheless, the unfolding of my research persuaded me to concentrate my PhD dissertation on Mbendjele performative practices.

## **The research methods**

During my time among the Mbendjele, I interrogated the nature of what is shared in Mbendjele society. This approach led me to analyse the ways the Mbendjele promote, value and share specific emotional states, and to focus on what happens in and around *massana* activities. I therefore gathered data on two main domains: the process of performing in *massana* activities and the collective management of emotions.

The music is prominent in Mbendjele's lives. I participated in as many *massana* activities as I could including forest spirit rituals, adult's and children's games. Despite the importance of recording techniques for the analysis, I chose to limit the recordings I would make. First to favour participant observation which allowed me to interact with performers, learn the songs and experience the process of performing in this context, second because the presence of a camera had a tendency to influence performers' behaviour. For example, shy children would stop singing when I filmed, or adults come to dance in front of the camera instead of dancing towards the spirits as they would normally do. I sometimes had issues reducing the distance the camera created and the influence it had on the events. I therefore limited my recordings and preferred taking notes during events of people's interactions, the songs used, and performer's emotional expressions.

Table 9 gathers the events I recorded during fieldwork among the Mbendjele. The great majority of the data collected concerns *massana* activities, forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) and children games. I also recorded instrument playing, traditional story-telling (*gano*) healing ceremonies (*eboka ya ngānga*), lullabies and fishing songs (*eboka efela*), as well as non-musical events depicting the Mbendjele's everyday activities (highlighted in the table).

**Table 9:** Events recorded during fieldwork among the Mbendjele (April 2013 – June 2014)

Event	Repertoire	Place	Date
Evening entertainment	Bolobe	Bangui-Motaba	10/4/2013
Entertainment	Mongadi (harp)	Bangui-Motaba	12/4/2013
Lullaby		Bangui-Motaba	13/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Bolobe	Bangui-Motaba	15/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Gano (story-telling)	Bangui-Motaba	17/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Mondume (harp)	Bangui-Motaba	18/4/2013
Morning entertainment	Bolobe	Bangui-Motaba	19/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Edjengi	Bangui-Motaba	19/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Dgoku	Bangui-Motaba	19/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Diānga	Bangui-Motaba	19/4/2013
Evening entertainment	Māngbese	Bangui-Motaba	19/4/2013
Entertainment	Edjengi, Bolobe	Bonguinda	16/5/2013
Healing ceremony	Eboka ya ngānga	Pokola	25/10/2013
Morning discussion		Makana	3/11/2013
Fishing		Makana	5/11/2013
Fishing	Eboka efela	Makana	5/11/2013
Lullaby	Eboka a baana	Makana	5/11/2013
Cooking		Makana	7/11/2013
Fishing		Makana	8/11/2013
Children playing	Babubu	Makana	15/11/2013
Children playing	Sangbanda	Makana	15/11/2013
Children playing	Djeke	Makana	15/11/2013
Gathering of yams		Makana	16/11/2013
Construction of traditional hut		Makana	16/11/2013
Entertainment	Game (musical bow)	Makana	18/11/2013
Entertainment	Game (musical bow)	Makana	25/11/2013
Cooking		Makana	26/11/2013
Honey collecting		Makana	11/12/2013
Evening entertainment	Gano (story-telling)	Makana	12/12/2013
Walk in the forest	Lifulele (flute)	Makana	13/12/2013
Evening entertainment	Bolobe	Makana	13/12/2013
Part of my initiation process	Dgoku	Makana	13/12/2013
Part of my initiation process	Dgoku	Makana	15/12/2013



Children playing	Moona kema	Bonguinda	20/12/2013
Commemoration ceremony	Bolobe, Edjengi	Sendébumu	21/12/2013
Children doing a spirit ritual	Mokondi	Bonguinda	22/12/2013
Weaving of bandudu skirts		Bonguinda	23/12/2013
End of the year celebrations	Bolobe	Bonguinda	24/12/2013
End of the year celebrations	Bolobe	Bonguinda	29/12/2013
Weaving of bandudu skirts		Bonguinda	31/12/2014
End of the year celebrations	Diānga	Bonguinda	1/1/2014
End of the year celebrations	Edjengi	Bonguinda	1/1/2014
End of the year celebrations	young initiates' Edjengi, Bolobe	Bonguinda	2/1/2014
Commemoration ceremony	Bolobe	Sendébumu	15/1/2014
Evening entertainment	Gkbagkba	Bonguinda	20/1/2014
Evening entertainment	Pfembe	Bonguinda	20/1/2014
Fishing		Bonguinda	24/1/2014
Work in manioc fields		Bonguinda	26/1/2014
Metal work (axes, knives, machettes)		Bonguinda	30/1/2014
Adult massana	Bale's Edjengi	Bonguinda	2/2/2014
Honey collecting		Bonguinda	20/2/2014
Children playing		Bonguinda	25/2/2014
Commemoration ceremony	Bolobe	Bonguinda	25/2/2014
Children playing	Gkbagkba	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Pfembe	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Anasi	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Girls training for Dgoku	Esule	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Mokpombo	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Ngolio	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Epatipati	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Māngasa ( <i>Bilo</i> game)	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Evening entertainment	Elānda	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Children playing	Nyakuta	Bonguinda	7/4/2014
Get help to hunt with traps	Makuma	Bonguinda	20/4/2014
For recording purposes, on my demand	Yeli	Bonguinda	20/4/2014

Solving of the community's problems	Mobema	Bonguinda	30/4/2014
Nice rain	Dgoku	Bonguinda	30/4/2014
Children massana	Mopepe	Bonguinda	10/6/2014
Children massana	Mopepe	Bonguinda	11/6/2014
Healing ceremony	Eboka ya ngānga	Djoubé	12/6/2014
For recording purposes, on my demand	Enyomo	Djoubé	13/6/2014
	Dāmba	Djoubé	13/6/2014
	Makbo	Djoubé	13/6/2014
	Kpbāmba	Djoubé	13/6/2014
Evening entertainment	Anasi	Djoubé	13/6/2014
Evening entertainment	Pfembe	Djoubé	13/6/2014
Evening entertainment	Gkbagkba	Djoubé	13/6/2014
For recording purposes, on my demand	Djoboko	Djoubé	14/6/2014
	Ekāmbaleki	Djoubé	14/6/2014
	Mondume (harp)	Djoubé	14/6/2014
My leaving festivities	Dgoku	Bonguinda	19/6/2014

The collect of musical data was essential to my analysis of the internal structure of Mbendjele music. The songs' lyrics are often difficult to understand during performances, because only one or two words might be pronounced. Each song nonetheless has a meaning and recordings allowed me to collect the lyrics and meanings attached to each song. After an event had been recorded, I could go to my friends and make them listen to each song to get precise information. Recordings also allowed me to enrich my musical transcriptions and better understand the way the vocal parts were constructed.

I also used recordings to collect data on the emotional content of performances. Each time I recorded a performance, I gathered people afterwards to watch the video while asking them to comment performers' actions and reactions. This technique allowed me to gather information on aesthetic norms such as the good/bad way to dance or to sing, the particularly appreciated moments, the small and big mistakes, etc. Because of the difficulty of framing questions in Mbendjee, I used audio recordings and videos of specific events as a support for conducting interviews.

**Table 10:** Songs' lyrics collected during fieldwork among the Mbendjele

Repertoire	Song title	Translation
Edjengi	<i>Ebele basele</i>	many sisters
	<i>Sima libala</i>	behind the marriage
	<i>To bina</i>	we dance [lingala]
	<i>Euye</i>	the lie
	<i>Elengi a baito</i>	the sweet taste of women
	<i>Konja a djongu</i>	the guardian of Edjengi's leaves
	<i>Izola, mobali a mbongo</i>	Izola is a rich man [lingala]
	<i>Ndjoku</i>	the elephant
	<i>Matima</i>	sending a message
	<i>Ebola</i>	the divorced woman
Libongu	<i>Tchakuli bonda</i>	boiling water
	<i>Euye</i>	the lie
	<i>Moto a wane</i>	a man died
Bolobe	<i>Maemba</i>	the handsome man
	<i>Aiyo</i>	[masculine name]
	<i>Akengwa dja a manebo</i>	He looks for the way to the anus.
	<i>Afinga libolo</i>	He slips into it.
	<i>Mofangu mosala angamu</i>	It is the sugar canne from my own work.
	<i>ekonja. Base me mendo</i>	Don't trouble me.
	<i>Mombangu</i>	
	<i>Base me mendo</i>	Don't trouble me
	<i>Enianga atala namu ngoye</i>	Enianga sees my mother
	<i>Likamboli a mbanda</i>	The problem of polygamy [lingala]
	<i>Esa aveanie</i>	Esa has come
	<i>Eita</i>	Wise old women
	<i>Isa</i>	[explained meaning of the song: "Please father, leave this man, I won't marry him"]
	<i>Otolo a mosala</i>	Otolo the working man
	<i>Ame nta ufe eita.</i>	I am not yet a wise old woman.
	<i>Batonga bene bamasa</i>	They [?] the young men.
	<i>Esa na mbongo</i>	The rich man
	<i>Moona adie ngondo</i>	The child is [?]
	<i>Male</i>	[female name)

	<i>Mawe</i>	[masculine name]
	<i>Yaya āngamu</i>	My elder brother/sister
	<i>Baebwa moto</i>	They take him out of mourning
	<i>Mbanda akosa me</i>	Polygamy mislead me
	<i>Bolingo</i>	Love
<i>Makuma</i>	<i>Buse kēngwa Ekeko</i>	We are looking for Ekeko
<i>Enyomo</i>	<i>Bobē o molimo</i>	It's bad, oh spirit
	<i>Molimo</i>	Spirit
	<i>Papa Yeye boi?</i>	Old Yeye, how is it?
	<i>Molimo bayānga</i>	They are calling the spirit
<i>Makbo</i>	<i>Molunge a manebo</i>	The warmth of the anus
<i>Ekāmbaleki</i>	<i>A likongo</i>	the spear
	<i>Ekāmbaleki ye?</i>	Who is Ekāmbaleki?
	<i>Adeba ta balamba</i>	[?]
	<i>Bolio</i>	[?]
<i>Yeli</i>	<i>Ngongolo</i>	[name of a famous deceased hunter]
	<i>Nzala</i>	Hunger
	<i>Etasi</i>	The call of the elephants
<i>Ngɔku</i>	<i>Li Ngɔku adie nyama ya mai</i>	<i>Ngɔku</i> is a water animal
	<i>Adwa bōse molimo āngwi ya mai</i>	She goes to get her spirit in the water
	<i>Ngɔku uete na mino</i>	<i>Ngɔku</i> doesn't have teeth [i.e. <i>Ngɔku</i> is not dangerous]
	<i>Ngɔku kaba, Ngɔku bosa, Ngɔku ma</i>	<i>Ngɔku</i> gives, <i>Ngɔku</i> takes, <i>Ngɔku</i> gets
	<i>Ngɔku adie moto a esēngo</i>	<i>Ngɔku</i> is a being of joy
	<i>Ngɔku āngusu mēndō</i>	<i>Ngɔku</i> is our [women's] matter
	<i>LiNgɔku adie nyama a bude</i>	<i>Ngɔku</i> is a hard animal
	<i>Molimo</i>	Spirit
	<i>Ekōsēlē</i>	[Name of a famous and powerful <i>Ngɔku</i> mokondi]
	<i>Nyama keye</i>	The animal went away
	<i>Ngɔku etina bapai</i>	Name of constitutive parts of a mat [i.e. <i>Ngɔku</i> is women's matter]
	<i>Yaya</i>	Big sister
	<i>Eita mama</i>	We call you elders

	<i>Dga</i>	Girlfriends [are called to join the performance]
	<i>Eloko sapa baketi</i>	Penis [men] should wear trainers
	<i>Modiambi amoena na yobe</i>	The liana [penis] got cut with a knife
	<i>Eloko lala</i>	The penis sleeps
	<i>Bene badieba pia li Dgoku</i>	They [men] don't know how to perform Dgoku
	<i>Eloko asa binye</i>	The penis is peeing
	<i>Bato, eloko akwanaka</i>	People, the penis gets flabby
	<i>Eloko vai</i>	Where is the penis?
	<i>Yoma embānda mobe</i>	Food is a complicated matter in polygamy
	<i>Masa tuba me</i>	Young man, pierce me
	<i>Boliŋgo</i>	Love
	<i>Emboŋgi</i>	[a pregnant woman wags her head after sexual intercourse]
<i>Diāŋga</i>	<i>Akaya ina namu mue likondu namu</i>	Akaya refuses me. I, the sorcerer.
	<i>Olandjo</i>	Lying to yourself
	<i>Amε mise na lamba lelake namu</i>	I, your mother am dying. Cry for me.
	<i>likondu</i>	Sorcery
<i>Mobema</i>	<i>Liwa mama botala liwa</i>	Death, mother. We see death
	<i>Okoyoka makombo</i>	You will hear the problem
	<i>Elengi</i>	Sugar [the sweet things]
	<i>Moona mwasi ŋgāŋga</i>	The healer's daughter
	<i>Buse likundu etata ko</i>	We see sorcery here
	<i>Iyaya abuka mabokeye</i>	Iyaya wraps her honey in a packet
	<i>Esende a di sakana na emboŋgo</i>	The squirrel does not play with the leopard
	<i>Ya ngondo efa āŋgamu</i>	My wild yam
	<i>Amombela ngoye</i>	He/she hurt my mother
<i>Mongadi</i>	<i>Nyamuka</i>	[A young girl who sleeps around]
<i>Mondume (harp)</i>	<i>Taye āŋgamu, abia mε. Boliŋgo akosa mε</i>	Father, the woman I love refused me. Love misled me.
	<i>Bolonga</i>	Marriage

	Yaya boi?	Elder brother, what's happening?
<i>Eboka ya ngãnga</i> (healing ceremony)	<i>Ame tala bane?</i>	Who am I looking at?

In addition, I conducted interviews regularly, which took most of the time the form of informal discussions. Trips in the forest were privileged moments to discuss without being disturbed, and I often took the opportunity of a break to have conversations. Nyemu and Ai were my main informants and I conducted many interviews with both of them. I also had regular group interviews with the young women of Nyemu's clan: Mwasi (Nyemu's daughter), Lumai and Semu (Nyemu's sisters), Pelagie (Nyemu's brother's wife) who often went in the forest together to gather wild yams. Similarly, I conducted several group interviews with young men as I accompanied them to look for honey or collect palm nuts.

Because of their nature, emotions are a difficult object to deal with for the anthropologist. Non-verbal and grounded in the practice rather than in the discourse, emotions are hard to observe and to measure. Additionally, Mbendjele have a limited number of words related to the domain of emotions. To collect data on Mbendjele's emotions, I relied on several areas of evidence. I looked at the verbal expressions of emotions and collected the vocabulary of emotions in Mbendjee. I also conducted interviews and took notes during discussions on the effect of emotions on other domains of life, such as the food quest, family life or performances. I also looked at facial expressions and body language as well as the nature and content of interactions during performances. I observed moments during which emotions are shared, managed, refused or addressed, healed transformed or amplified before, during and after performances.

## **The Mbendjele: context**

As I explained above, the conditions of the fieldwork led me to focus on the Mbendjele of the northern part of the RoC. In this section, I will describe the context of the population I have been living with. I will first situate my population of study before giving some insights on Mbendjele's rare situation of modern hunter-gatherers. Secondly, I will focus on the relations Mbendjele maintain with their *Bilo* (non-Pygmy) neighbours, using insights from anthropological analysis of 'Pygmy/Bilo' relationships.

### **Genetic and historical background**

Findings concerning the common ground of cultural features shared by Central African Pygmy populations in ethnomusicological studies echo results from archaeo-linguistics and archaeology (Phillipson 2005; Vansina 1995; Rexová & al 2006). As Barham noted (2006: 2), "Questions of affinity [have] already [been] raised by geneticists (Cavalli-Sforza 1986; Coia & al 2002), archaeologists (Phillipson 1976; Smith 1997) and more recently by biological anthropologists (Morris & Ribot 2006). Even more recently, genetics allowed scholars to pull back the veil that covers Pygmy populations' shared history.

Verdu presented the results of his research on Pygmy populations and showed that all central African pygmy populations probably share a common origin (Verdu & al 2009; Patin & al 2009; Batini & al 2011). Scholars found that about 70 000 years ago, a population of *Homo sapiens* split into two groups. One of these two ancestral populations evolved into what we consider today as 'Pygmies'. About 20 000 years ago, this ancestral population of Pygmies split into two groups, the western Pygmies (western side of the Congo Basin) and the eastern Pygmies known as the Mbuti and Twa (eastern side of the Congo Basin). Finally, about 3 000 years ago, the ancestral population of western pygmies split into several groups of people, known today as the Bongo, Batswa, Kola, Baka and Aka Pygmies (Verdu 2012: 61-62).

In this thesis, I focus on an Aka group from the Likouala region (northern part of the RoC) living along the Motaba River. In everyday life, people referred to themselves as 'BaAka', which is a common denomination among Pygmy populations across the

western Congo Basin. During discussions with BaAka from other areas of the RoC (e.g. Pokola or Ouessou), they would gladly say that they were 'Mbendjele', although I never heard them call themselves that way in another context. The evidence of great regional differences which is provided in this thesis suggests that the Aka of the Motaba River might not be Mbendjele but another Aka sub-group closer to the Aka living on the other side of the border in the DRC. I was not able to establish the group's origin during my fieldwork. I therefore call the group I studied 'the Mbendjele of the Likouala region' or 'the Mbendjele of the Motaba River' to distinguish them from the 'Southern Mbendjele' living in the Sangha region and studied by Lewis (2002). My fieldwork study was mostly concerned with four villages: Bonguinda, Sendébumu, Djoubé and Bangui-Motaba. These four villages are along or close to the Motaba River (see figure 1).





#### Legend:

 : Area of study

The Aka groups studied were from four villages:

- Bangui-Motaba
- Djoubé
- Banguinda
- Sendébumu

**Figure1:** Research area among the Mbendjele of the RoC

Source: ambacongogabon.wordpress.com

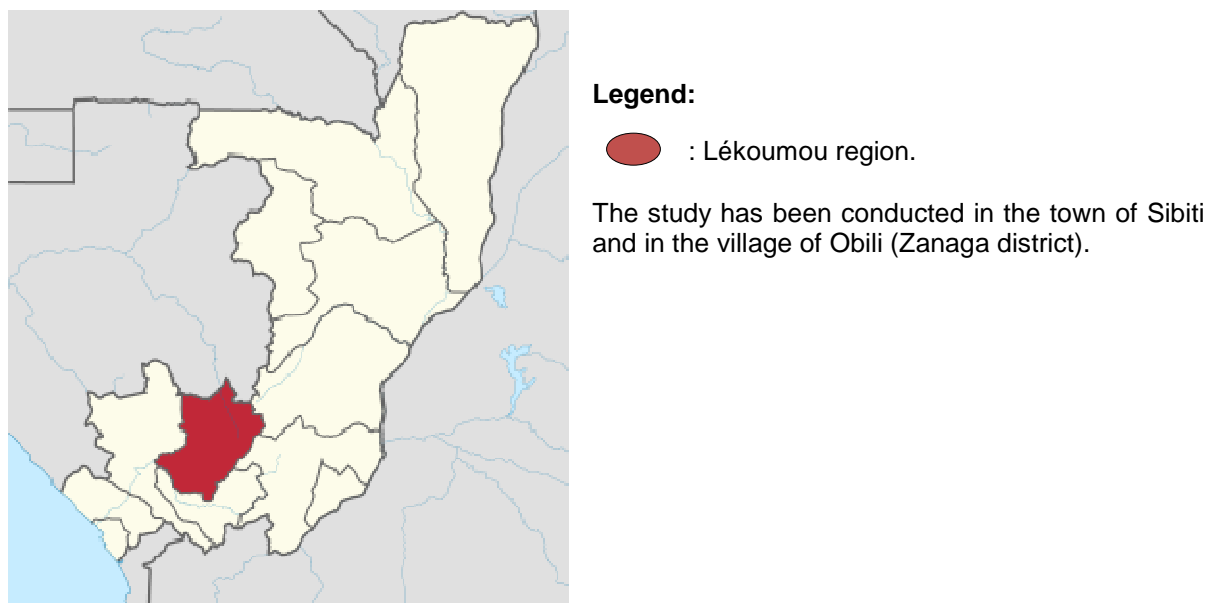
## The semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life

The Mbendjele are among the Pygmy populations which have been most studied, and are also one of the last Pygmy populations who still maintain a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. This is due to a number of factors presented below.

The RoC has been politically stable for the last ten years. Even if the infrastructures are not optimum, they are in a much better state than some of the neighbouring countries such as the DRC or the CAR. The RoC's economy has been boosted by oil production in Pointe-Noire, allowing the country to develop economically. This stability, both political and economic, has had a major impact on Congolese people's way of life. Looking at the DRC, the quasi-absence of infrastructures in some parts of the country (such as the Equateur Province), the absence of governmental authorities at a local level in rural areas, the constant state of civil war forcing people to leave their lands against their will, the government sanctioned savage exploitation of forests and economical instability are factors that explain in a large part the process of sedentarization and the degradation of cultural

diversity among Pygmy populations. Changes linked to agriculture, sedentarization and monetarisation have been also recognized as dramatically influencing the social and cultural aspects of Pygmy societies (Biesbrook 1999; Köhler 2005; Oloa-Biloa 2015; Yasuoka, 2012), leading to a depletion of egalitarian practices.

Still, the RoC's stability did not suffice to ensure Pygmy populations' well-being in all parts of the country. At a national level, great variations can be observed from one region to another. Lewis pointed out some regional variations among the Aka group: "some Mbendjele near the CAR are evangelized and although relatively sedentary do not farm. Those living near logging towns may spend long periods working outside the forest. Others further south spend most of the year in the forest, with some groups not coming out to villages for years at a time" (Lewis 2014:220). Despite these differences within local groups, there are even bigger differences between different Pygmy groups in RoC.



**Figure 2:** Research area among the Bongo of the RoC  
*Source: Wikipedia.org*

In 2012, I conducted research with Bongo Pygmies in the southern part of the Lékoumou region (see figure 2) as part of a UNICEF mission to investigate women and children's rights among Pygmy populations. I visited Bongo villages in the rural forested areas, as well as Bongo living in the town of Sibiti.

The Bongo are highly sedentarized, and suffer from discrimination from their *Bilo* neighbours at school, in hospitals, when facing judicial authorities and in everyday life. The situation is worst in towns and cities where Bongo are pushed away further and further from the town centres, and live in slums. I could observe a lot of physical violence within the Bongo community, and an absence of sharing practices outside the nuclear family. The scarcity of food seemed to have turned people against each other, taking social and cultural collective activities to pieces while leaving individuals on the margins of *Bilo* society. The intense bush meat trade reduced forests' capacity to sustain a hunter-gatherer way of life, and Bongo (adults as well as children) turned to alcoholism and drug abuse (such as glue sniffing), which had a devastating effect on community relationships and on their relations with the *Bilo* world. A semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life, based on egalitarian principles is no longer possible for the Bongo I met. Many other Pygmy populations are known to suffer from similar issues. According to Lewis (2014: 219), the pressure on Pygmy populations mainly comes from intensive bush meat trade nurtured by the demand in growing cities, artisanal and industrial mining and logging activities as well as the closure of large sections of remaining good forest to create national parks.

By contrast, Mbendjele living in the northern parts of the RoC face a very different situation. Many Mbendjele communities now live inside logging concessions. In the area I worked these were mainly managed by the CIB<sup>5</sup> (Congolaise Industrielle des Bois). CIB is the largest forestry company of the country, with 1.4 million hectares of forest management concessions in the Sangha and Likouala provinces. The development of two saw mills in Pokola and Loundoungou allowed the locals to benefit from steady infrastructures. To export logs and saw timber requires large roads maintained throughout the year, as well as operational water and electricity facilities. In the town of Pokola, inhabitants benefit from clean water and electricity with very rare break downs, a decent phone and internet network, a well equipped hospital and furnished schools. CIB is the first forestry company to have obtained a FSC certification<sup>6</sup> in Africa and appears to take seriously the environment and the populations when planning logging operations.

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<sup>5</sup> CIB has been bought by the group OLAM in 2012.

<sup>6</sup> FSC stands for 'Forest Stewardship Council', and is an environmental label intended to ensure sustainable forest management.

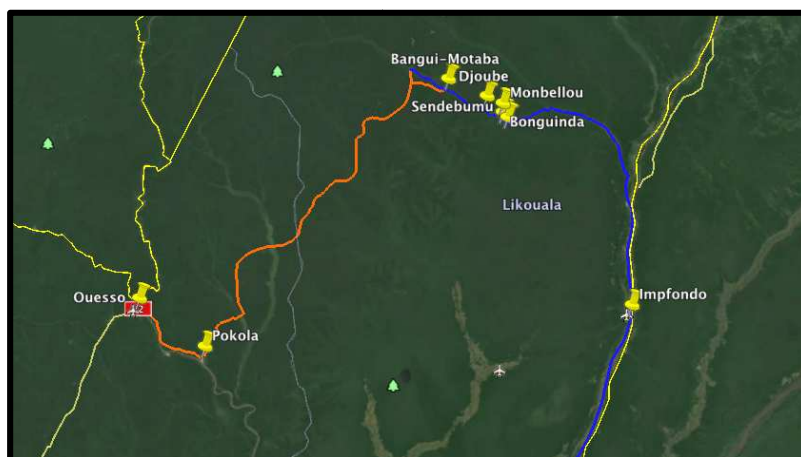
I visited seven concessions in Cameroon, the DRC and the RoC. Logging operations in central Africa can be costly due to the lack of infrastructures. Forest companies have to build and maintain roads themselves to transport logs over long distances, often in unsafe environments. All the equipment is shipped at great cost, and expensive repairs are often needed. Operations are often made impossible during rainy seasons, which curtails profits. This is usually solved through severe cost-cutting in the sectors of workers' health and safety, as well as compensations to local populations and forests' sustainability. In Cameroon, I saw workers carry lumbers on their heads, wearing only short trousers and flip-flops while walking down forested hills. In the DRC, I saw workers who were regularly left in the forest for days, with just tarpaulins to protect them from the rain and with little water supply. I could observe many conflicts between logging companies and local populations. Communication was often confusing on both sides, and many companies failed to compensate populations in sustainable ways. Companies would rather hand elites large amounts of cash instead of offering development projects with local communities. When offering cash to populations, a large proportion of people are left out.

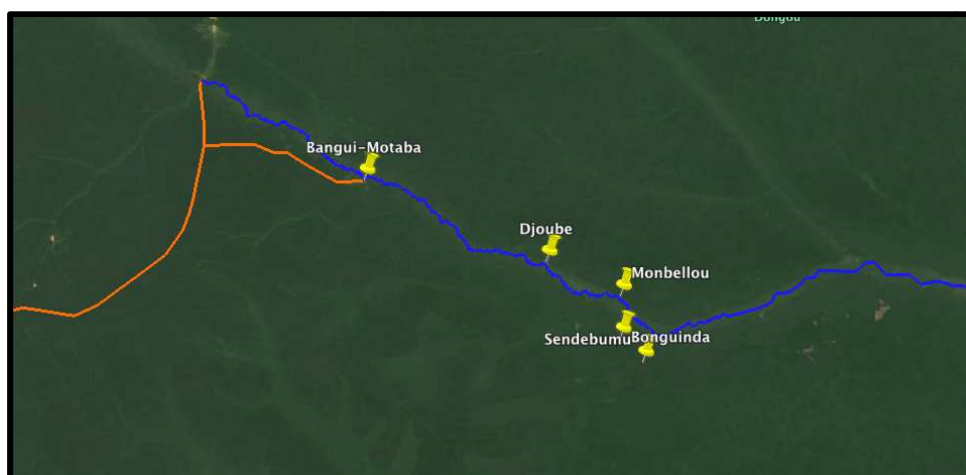
During the year I spent within CIB concessions, I never witnessed practices approaching what I had seen elsewhere. CIB workers are all safely equipped and benefit from professional boots, masks, helmets and gloves. CIB constructed houses for all its workers, supplied clean water and electricity in each logging town (Pokola, Loundoungou, and Kabo). The forest is managed sustainably, and some areas of forests part of CIB concessions contain large numbers of animals, including rare big mammals (e.g. chimpanzees, elephants and gorillas). A rotation per year ensures enough time for the re-growth of exploited forest. I am not trying to paint an idyllic portrait of the situation in northern RoC, as logging exploitation by definition deprives populations of resources and lands, and militaristic enforcement of conservation laws has traumatised many communities (Lewis 2016). What I emphasize here is that the political and economic stability of the RoC, added to the relatively sustainable exploitation of the forest by CIB allowed Mbendjele to pursue a semi-nomadic and egalitarian hunter-gatherer way of life, when other Pygmy groups could not. For instance, Baka in Cameroon were forced to sedentarize and to leave forests

occupied by foresters. The creation of large protected areas (Ndoki and Lac T   ) in the Likouala, has denied Mbendjele access to large parts of their forest, and therefore do not travel as far as they use to. But the forests which are available to them still have game, fish, fruits and wild yams to sustain a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Bonguinda is situated inside the CIB concession of Loundoungou. This area of forest has proven to be one of the richest in the region in terms of floral and faunal diversity (Jean-Fran  ois Gillet, pers. com., 2013). Elephants, chimpanzees, gorillas, large and small antelopes, duikers, dozens of birds, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, leopards, wild pigs and monkeys are among the animals which can be encountered in the forest around Bonguinda. This rare situation in central Africa allows Mbendjele to maintain their livelihoods. Many chose to maintain a hunter-gatherer way of life, and the state of forests in northern RoC permitted this choice.

In the Likouala region of the RoC, the Congolese government lacks the capacity to provide the population with major social equipment and infrastructures. Instead, the government relies on locally active logging companies to maintain roads, build schools, hospitals and other activities normally undertaken by the state (Lewis 2002: 42-43). The CIB thus has a more direct impact on the Mbendjele of the Motaba River than do the institutions of the state. The logging towns developed by the CIB (the biggest being Pokola) allowed the development of a lively business activity which contrasts with the neglected rural areas. In Mombelu, Bonguinda's closest *Bilo* village, the inhabitants lead a fairly politically autonomous life with little intervention from the state.





**Figure 58:** Maps of the main research area<sup>7</sup>

The maps above show the location of the four villages which have been under study: Bangui-Motaba, Djoubé, Bonguinda and Sendébumu. Mombelu is a *Bilo* village and, in the official distribution of municipalities, Bonguinda is considered as a neighbourhood of Mombelu. These four villages offer a variety of situations which allowed me to study the Mbendjele in various contexts. Bangui-Motaba is accessible by road with a direct access to Pokola. Impfondo being also accessible by boat favours trade in Bangui-Motaba. Djoubé and Mombelu are only accessible by boat while Bonguinda and Sendébumu are more isolated but in a resourceful area of the forest. Sendébumu sits inside an abandoned palm tree plantation and the abundance of palm nuts makes it a valued site to visit. Bonguinda sits in a forest area particularly generous with game. Bangui-Motaba, Djoubé and Mombelu are *Bilo* villages which contain an Mbendjele neighbourhood whereas Bonguinda and Sendébumu are “super camps”, i.e. Mbendjele-only permanent villages.

There are around 120 inhabitants in Mombelu and 200 Mbendjele inhabitants in Bonguinda, although this number can drop as low as 10 inhabitants during the fishing season as people go to live in small forest camps. Mbendjele are most numerous in Bonguinda in August and in December, when large collective rituals are held. In Sendébumu live around 50 Mbendjele. This number also varies during the year. Bangui-Motaba is a larger village, with a total of 1000 inhabitants; 300 *Bilo* and 700 Mbendjele.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Botkin who graciously helped me to transfer GPS points and draw these maps.

From my observations, a large majority of Mbendjele in this area spend at least half the year in forest camps. The rest of their time is divided between Mbendjele super camps (Bonguinda and Sendébumu), *Bilo* villages (mostly Mombelu, Djoubé and Bangui-Motaba) and CIB logging towns (Pokola and Lundungu, the latter being a much smaller town but closest to Bonguinda). While living in forest camps, Mbendjele spend their days hunting and gathering, sometimes using the opportunity of CIB forestry roads to plant a few banana trees and manioc. In *Bilo* villages, Mbendjele often work for *Bilo* in their fields, extract oil from palm nuts and hunt with *Bilo*'s guns. They can also trade forest goods or be asked to collect and carry materials for the construction of houses, or to collect and carry fire wood. In return for their services, the Mbendjele receive manufactured goods, food, alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or money. Mbendjele also trade honey and bush meat as well as manufactured products like weaved mats and baskets. In Lundungu and Pokola, the Mbendjele can work as 'communicateurs' with local communities, as tree prospectors, guides, path-makers or chain-saw operators.

Typically, a single man or a family would go to Pokola for a few months in order to make money and buy manufactured goods such as a radio, clothes, cooking pots or machetes, before going back to Bonguinda and the forest camps. However, great variety can be found from one Mbendjele family or individual to another. Some can spend years in logging towns working, others spend years in the forest without coming out, others again spend most of their time in *Bilo* villages. Like so, Sakembe left his wife and children in Bonguinda to go to Pokola. He found a job as a tree prospector at the CIB and stayed there for two years before coming back to his family. A family from Bangui-Motaba spent more than five years living in forest camps, without coming to *Bilo* villages or logging towns. Old Malo spend most of his time living in the *Bilo* village Mombelu, and rarely goes to live in forest camps except during the fishing season. The Mbendjele's movements can be planned in advance or opportunistic, and exploit every possibility of acquiring a variety of goods and foods.

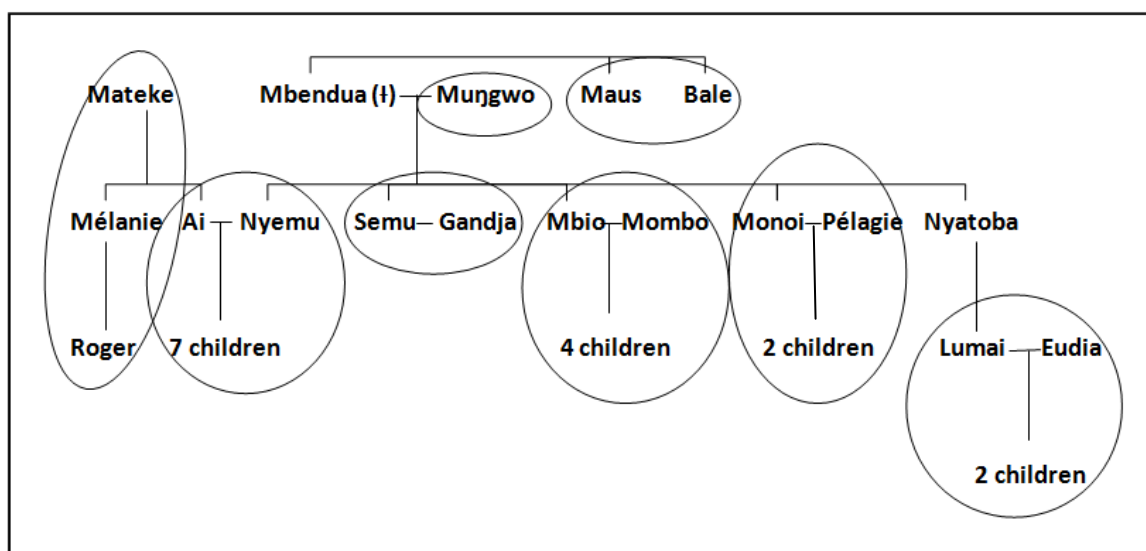
In Bonguinda and Sendébumu, most Mbendjele families have a field made using slash and burn agricultural techniques. Are grown manioc, cassava, plantain and fruit bananas, taro, yams, papayas and corn, more rarely squash. As Bird-David noted, hunting and gathering is only one of the several strategies employed to make

a living and rarely the unique occupation of the people so-called (Bird-David 1988; 1992). In Mbendjele discourse, a healthy life is obtained through a diet of both forest and village food. Eating only village food or only forest food “hurts one’s belly” (*ebea moi*) and moving from one place to another regularly is advised to obtain a variety of products and a healthy diet. Seasonal residential mobility is thus the norm but the Mbendjele in my research area moved to a limited number of places.

Mombelu, Djoubé, Pokola and Lundungu are the main visited villages and towns throughout the year. A smaller proportion of Mbendjele would visit relatives or participate to *massana* rituals in Bangui-Motaba and Mbanza, an isolated village a day’s walk from Bonguinda. In the forest as well, the Mbendjele go to a limited number of places acting as resource centres. Some areas of the forest are good for large game or wild yams, seasonal caterpillars, fruit and nut trees, and people regularly go back to the same places to access known resources. Despite the widespread practice of agriculture, the Mbendjele of my research area spend at least half the year living almost exclusively from hunting and gathering forest products. This added to the limited number of places they visit led me to identify them as *semi-nomadic* hunter-gatherers.

Considering the high mobility of people, I chose to use the term ‘community’ to design the clans which share the same space and occasionally but regularly live together. The Mbendjele living in Bonguinda form a community, even though they might only spend a few weeks or months together during the year. The concept of “community” nonetheless translates an emic category as they call themselves “the people of Bonguinda” (*bato ua Bonguinda*), even those who spend most of their time in Mombelu or in forest camps. To distinguish the community from the clans, I use the term ‘group’ to design the people who live together in a forest camp. The ‘group’ is constituted according to kinship and affective ties.





**Figure 59:** composition of the forest camp Mokakwa (May 2013)

In the example provided above (figure 59), the *group* (inhabitants of the same forest camp) is composed of members of the same clan, which is the norm but is not exclusive. On this diagram, each circle corresponds to a hut. Individuals inside the same circle spend the night in the same hut. Affective ties are paramount in the choices people make when living in forest camps. In the example of the composition of the camp Mokakwa, Nyatoba (Nyemu's sister) is living with her husband Sakembe in another forest camp. Lumai (Nyatoba's daughter), chose not to go with her parents but rather to stay with her grand-mother Mungwo, who takes good care of her children. Likao (Nyemu's brother) chose to go with his in-laws and live in their forest camp instead of staying with his mother and brothers. This example shows that even though people tend to live with their close relatives, the emphasis put on affective ties influences greatly the composition of groups.

### **Mbendjele social organisation**

The Mbendjele society is egalitarian and is characterised by the absence of leaders. Some individuals have socially recognized positions namely master-hunter (*tuma*), traditional healer (*ngānga*) and wise elder (*kombeti*). These specialists are usually charismatic individuals respected for their wisdom. However they do not exercise any authority on the others who do not have to do what they say. The political organisation of Mbendjele society will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1. For

now, what is stressed is the importance of individual freedom in terms of mobility for the Mbendjele's social organisation. Without anyone fulfilling the role of recognised leader, each individual or family is free to move wherever and whenever they wish, creating important movements and variations throughout the area during the year. When living in forest camps, the Mbendjele form smaller groups of 10 to 40 individuals. Such groups are composed according to kinship and affective ties.

The Mbendjele society is structured around clans (*bolomu*), defining intermarriage rules. Clans are named, patrilineal and exogamous as marriage is strictly forbidden between two individuals of the same clan. Genealogies are not long, generally three or four generations (Lewis 2002: 70). Every individual separates people belonging to their clan or family (*ediānga ka di moti*, litt. "one same family") and the others (*etuka*, litt. "someone who is not from my clan"). Individuals from the same clan call each other with a variety of kinship terms according to their relation. Uncles and uncles' children are called *noko* (litt. "uncle"), while grand-parents and cousins are called *koko* (litt. "grand-father/grand-mother"). Siblings call themselves *kadi* or *ndeko* (litt. "brother/sister"). Different terms are used to call *etuka* individuals. Friends are called *kangai* or *moninga* and in-laws *mokofe*. Homonyms call themselves *ndoi*, regardless of their clans' affiliation.

Despite a strict differentiation between relatives and non-relatives (*ediānga ka di moti* and *etuka*), several kinship terms are used to emphasise an affective relation. The two terms *modimi* and *kombeti* designate respectively someone "younger than me" or "older than me". Non-relative Mbendjele who grew up together or spent a lot of time together during their childhood often use these two terms to recall their long-lasting relations as close friends. Good friends can also call themselves *ndeko* (brother/sister) to emphasise their strong friendship. Mbendjele can entertain such relations of friendship with their Bilo neighbours.

Many *Bilo* villages are also situated in CIB concessions. Mbendjele and *Bilo* are in constant relations that can vary greatly from one village to another and between individuals in the same village. I will now focus on the relationships Mbendjele of Bonguinda maintain with *Bilo*, using the perspective offered by several anthropological studies on *Bilo*/Pygmy relationships in different contexts.

## Relationships with *Bilo* neighbours

A lot has been published about the relationship between *bilo* farmers and Pygmy populations across central Africa. Barham highlighted the fact that Pygmies are often considered in the same manner by their neighbours: “a shared reality of social exclusion, political marginalisation and negative stereotyping seems to be the lot of the BaTwa across central Africa” (Barham 2006: 3). Most anthropologists agree to say that hunter-gatherers generally distinguish themselves from their neighbours by their peculiar way of life, specific in different points of view; whether concerning the economy, the social organization or music and dance practices. Interrogating the term ‘BaTwa’, Barham identifies a common social denomination to most Pygmy groups as ‘people who always move’ or ‘the other’. Many anthropologists argued that Pygmies identify themselves in opposition to their neighbours.

Woodburn showed that in Sub-Saharan Africa, differences in modes of subsistence are represented as ethnic differences (Woodburn 1997). Others (such as Turnbull, Bahuchet, Grinker or Kenrick) argued that “cultural significance of the contrast between forest people and village people [is] one of the most fundamental markers of ethnic differences in the forested regions” (Lewis 2002b: 5). In contrast, some academics such as Rupp do not consider the category of “hunter-gatherer” as a relevant one. According to Rupp, “hunter-gatherers” should not be treated as a distinct and identifiable social type. She argues that “[the] fact of conforming to the theoretical paradigm of ‘hunter-gatherers’ seems to be a more important criterion in imputing their identity than the many and varied dynamics between “hunter-gatherers” and their neighbours, even when these relations with surrounding communities may be both intricate and intimate” (Rupp 2003: 38). In this thesis, I will explore this contrast between *Bilo* and Mbendjele culture in Bonguinda and Mombelu on the Motaba River and examine some of the ways the two communities interact with and perceive each other in order to contribute to the study of ethnicity in Central Africa.

Robillard & Bahuchet (2012) and others showed that several Pygmy groups across central Africa live in close contact with other non-Pygmy communities. Robillard & Bahuchet highlighted the inappropriateness of the vocabulary used by observers to

describe the nature of *Bilo*/Pygmy relationships, using terms such as *servants*, *slaves*, *vassals*, *clients*, *parasites* or *symbiotes* (*ibid*: 27). Yet the relations between Pygmies and farmers have been among the most studied subjects since the beginning of scholars' interest in African hunter-gatherers (Takeuchi 2014). Despite discussions and debates, several authors showed that, in many parts of the world, hunter-gatherers exchange with farmer communities (Bird-David 1988; Headland & Reid 1989; Ikeya & al 2009; Robillard & Bahuchet 2012; Sellato 1989; Spielmann & Eder 1994). The issue of the relationship between Pygmy populations and their neighbours has been studied in various ways (e.g. Kazadi 1981; Bahuchet & Guillaume 1986; Ben-Ari 1987; Köhler & Lewis 2002, Joiris 2003), and the long-lasting character of these relationships seems to be confirmed by recent findings in genetics. As Verdu revealed, Pygmies and non-Pygmies share enough genes to prove a steady and consistent relations throughout centuries (Verdu 2012: 61).

By discussing with *Bilo* in Cameroon, the DRC and the RoC, I noticed that Pygmies are often regarded as savages or as children by their *Bilo* neighbours. They are feared and respected for their knowledge of the forest, though at the same time they are considered stupid, dirty and childish. *Bilo* often consider that they are superior to Pygmies and that it is their duty to educate them so that they could eventually reach the level of *Bilo*. Relationships between Pygmies and *Bilo* are thus often infused with misplaced paternalism from one community and hypocrisy from the other. Indeed, Pygmies can be good at pretending to be stupid and incompetent in order to induce pity among their *Bilo* neighbours. The reason for Pygmies to often pretend being miserable in front of *Bilo* is that they are more likely to receive gifts and goods from *Bilo* if they appear dirt-poor. Lewis (2014: 222) showed that “*Bilo* are useful for providing Mbendjele with access to goods from outside the forest (notably iron and salt), and appreciated for their role in judging disputes between Mbendjele that the community is unable to resolve.”

The relationship appears unbalanced especially because of the use of physical violence by *Bilo*. Pygmies, being products of a fundamentally non-violent culture (Lewis 2002), tend to avoid conflict and violent actions against individuals, especially *Bilo*. Firstly because several social and cultural mechanisms, that will be described in this thesis, construct Pygmies as non-violent people; and secondly because being in an argument with a *Bilo* can have disastrous consequences for a Pygmy such as

prison or other coercive punishments. Nevertheless, they often get into conflicts with *Bilo* because of national or regional laws and obligations. As I described above, the Mbendjele –when compared to other Pygmy groups in central Africa- have been somewhat protected from external influences. But some events such as regional elections, Congolese national laws concerning property and land-use or national governance confront the Mbendjele to cultural aspects they actively refute and condemn, leading to conflicts between the two communities of farmers and hunter-gatherers.

### **Mbendjele/*Bilo* relations in Bonguinda**

I will now introduce the way Mbendjele from Bonguinda interact with their neighbours and approach the issue of intra-community conflicts. In Bonguinda, Mbendjele are in contact with mainly two *Bilo* villages: Mombelu and Djoubé. According to the *Bilo* chief of Mombelu, Mombelu is a quite recent village<sup>8</sup>. *Bilo* used to live in Bonguinda which at the time was a strictly *Bilo* village. During the Second World War, the French army required the support of people from the Motaba River (Bonguinda included), and they needed to be able to use the Motaba River for faster transport of resources. Bonguinda being isolated in the forest, away from rivers and roads, Bondongo *Bilo* created the village of Mombelu just by the Motaba River so that they could easily use boats. The Mbendjele took the now abandoned village of Bonguinda over and *Bilo* never returned.

This explains why, in the official distribution of municipalities in the Likouala region, Bonguinda is considered as a neighbourhood of Mombelu. Yet Mbendjele consider that Bonguinda is a village in its own right and they do not recognize Mombelu's authority as legitimate, even though every official communication goes through the *Bilo* chief and his staff in Mombelu. Because Bonguinda is only accessible by walking along small paths, often submerged by water, Congolese officials very rarely bother to reach Bonguinda. Instead they use boats to go to Mombelu, and let the *Bilo* chief transmit their message or take action for whatever is needed. This situation leaves a lot of responsibilities on Mombelu's chief, who has to suffer the

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<sup>8</sup> The story of the villages of Bonguinda and Mombelu has been told to me at several occasions during casual discussions with inhabitants of Bonguinda, Mombelu and Djoubé.

consequences of any administrative mistake or absenteeism from Bonguinda's inhabitants. On the other hand, the situation gives more power to Mombelu's inhabitants who act and speak on behalf of Bonguinda's Mbendjele, leaving the latter unable to communicate directly with Congolese authorities. No Mbendjele in Bonguinda knows how to read or write, thus all written communications are delivered to Mombelu's chief, and he is left in charge of translation for Mbendjele.

Additionally, *Bilo* need the Pygmy work force to work in their fields and access forest goods. Lewis pointed out that "most Mbendjele spend about two-thirds of the year hunting and gathering in forest camps and some part of the year near agriculturalists' villages. Although continuing to hunt and gather, here they will also trade, labor or perform services for villagers in return for food, goods, alcohol or money" (Lewis 2014: 220). Pygmies of Bonguinda often work for the Bondongo of Mombelu and Djoubé. They clear areas of forest to create new fields, burn the cut vegetation to enrich the soil before planting cassavas, maize, sweet potatoes and other tubers and vegetables. They harvest the fields and bring the heavy vegetables back to *Bilo* houses. Men climb palm trees to harvest palm nuts, and help the *Bilo* extract the oil that will be used for cooking. They also carve boats and paddles, and hunt with *Bilo* guns.

The wage for all these various tasks highly depends on *Bilo* and on the relationship they personally have with Mbendjele individuals. Some *Bilo* only pay Mbendjele in promises, or small amounts of cigarettes and alcohol. Others treat Mbendjele as their equals, and agree with them on money or manufactured goods such as machetes, cooking pots or shoes, depending on the Mbendjele's needs. Other *Bilo* considered that some Mbendjele belong to them, and that each day "his" Mbendjele<sup>9</sup> would spend away from him and the village –and thus without working- would be considered as a debt. They use intimidatory and violent tactics to force Mbendjele to come to Mombelu, like burning their houses or stealing all their goods (cooking pots, machetes, clothes) to force them to come back to Mombelu and work to get their things back.

All the factors outlined above result in a contentious relationship between people from Mombelu and people from Bonguinda. The chief of Mombelu is held

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<sup>9</sup> The use of possessive pronouns when referring to Pygmies and *Bilo* will be discussed in chapter 2.

responsible for Mombelu and Bonguinda inhabitants, and has to suffer the consequences, good or bad, of their behaviour. I was in Bonguinda for the elections of regional governors (*Préfets de Région*) in August 2013. The chief of Mombelu was charged, like every village chief in the RoC, with making sure all inhabitants of his village were present for the census made by visiting regional officials in preparation for the elections. The chief sent his secretary to Bonguinda to deliver the message that all Mbendjele had to come back to Mombelu for the census. A couple of *Bilo* living in Mombelu took it upon themselves to deliver the message their own way. They went to Bonguinda and scared people out, stealing people's belongings and burning a few houses down. Their interpretation of the message was to make all Mbendjele go to Mombelu by force, using all means necessary –physical violence included. It was in their interest to force Mbendjele to come to Mombelu, as they intended to use Mbendjele labour to build a new school in Mombelu.

The *Bilo* chief was devastated when he heard what his people had done, yet he could not undo what had been done. Other *Bilo* from Mombelu and from Djoubé strongly disapproved of the action, and accused the culprits of being nothing more than animals to act this way. By contrast, other *Bilo* openly said that this kind of behaviour was the only way to make a Pygmy do what you needed him to do, and therefore supported the violent methods employed. Despite the open disapproval of many *Bilo* and Mbendjele villagers, no action was taken against the perpetrators. Some Mbendjele agreed to go to Mombelu, but only individuals who had interests in visiting the *Bilo* village did so. Some needed various goods while others wanted to work in order to get alcohol and cigarettes. Frightened by the burning, stealing and beating perpetrated by the two *Bilo*, many Mbendjele decided to stay away from Mombelu and ignored the census.

In September, census officials came to Mombelu to verify lists. Many inhabitants of Bonguinda were not registered, and officials warned Mombelu's chief that the Prefect was coming in three days and as such lists had to be completed before his arrival. Mombelu's chief seemed very tense. He told me that the Prefect was a former military officer, and he seemed to be scared of the repercussions he would suffer if he failed to deliver completed lists. He was also anxious because Mbendjele were getting ready for the fishing season, during which they disperse to remote fishing camps. He decided to send a member of his staff to Bonguinda with the lists and,

assisted by an Mbendjele man from Mombelu, to have all Mbendjele from Bonguinda registered. This desperate move succeeded and the Prefect was welcomed with fully completed census lists.

The relations between Pygmies and *Bilo* have been described as “an ambivalent model based on solidarity AND domination” (Joiris 2003: 59). In her analysis of the relations between Baka Pygmies and the neighbouring farmer communities in South East Cameroon, Joiris highlighted the existence of “pseudo-kinship bonds” and “friendship bonds” between members of the two communities. “Although they can be genuinely affective relations, they should be considered as a series of social and mutual obligations” (*ibid.*)

While some *Bilo* despise Mbendjele as the above ethnographic vignette illustrates, others are very friendly with Mbendjele and consider them as their equals. I remember a time during the rainy season in 2014 when I accompanied Nyemu and his brother Mbio to a trip to Djoubé. We stopped on our way at an old *Bilo*'s fishing camp. When we arrived, the camp was empty but big fish were drying above a fire. Delighted by the sight of food, Nyemu and Mbio helped themselves without hesitation and started eating the fish. I was a bit concerned about what the *Bilo* would say when they would find out we ate all their fish, but Nyemu assured me it was not a problem with this man. “This *bilo* is my friend”, he said (*Milo andoko adie moninga āngamu*). A few minutes later, the *Bilo* and his son-in-law came back to the camp with their fresh harvest of palm wine. He smiled at us and appeared to be very happy to see us. He added some plantain bananas to our meal and we all had palm wine together. We were all eating in the same plate and drinking in the same plastic glass. Nyemu and the old *Bilo* talked like old friends, and once we finished eating, the old man took us all across the river to Djoubé in his boat. That night we all slept in his house, after his wife cooked us some fish in palm oil and we all shared the old man's harvest of palm wine. I could see nothing but sincere friendship between the two men, without an ounce of hostility or hypocrisy. During the time I spent in the Likouala, I would often go to Djoubé to buy groceries from a little shop. Each time Nyemu accompanied me, I never saw any insulting behaviour or malevolence between the two men. Still, this *Bilo* did not behave the same way with other Mbendjele. I saw him insult a young man who was accused of stealing. He called him “*Mombēnga*”, a derogatory *Bilo* word for ‘Pygmy’ which emphasizes all the



negative aspects of 'Pygmy-ness', i.e. being lazy, childish, dirty and incapable of thinking ahead.

Following Nyemu and his family along in all their travels, I would regularly go to Mombelu and Djoubé, and I spent time with *Bilo*. While discussing with them I heard all kind of opinions concerning Mbendjele, and they obviously did not all agree on how Pygmies should be treated. In the same way, all Mbendjele were not behaving the same way towards *Bilo*. While some tried to establish a peaceful and honest relationship with *Bilo*, other Mbendjele would use every possible opportunity to trick them in order to get money and goods from them without any compensation.

This said, *Bilo* and Mbendjele relationships are underpinned by mistrust and disregard on both sides. In everyday life, Mbendjele call the *Bilo* "gorillas" (*ebobo*), to express their disdain at *Bilo*' way of thinking in terms of ownership (see Lewis 2002:100), while *Bilo* call the Mbendjele *bambenga*, which is a way of emphasizing Pygmies' dirty and unkempt appearance. In *Bilo* villages, Mbendjele and *Bilo* children are often aggressive toward each other, and tensions are always implicit in the two communities' relations. The contentious aspect of *Bilo*/ Pygmies relationships might be partly due to the inherent incompatibility of delayed-return and immediate-return systems when they are forced to function as a whole under a single national authority. Consequently, I chose not to use a *Bilo* translator during fieldwork. As very few Mbendjele speak French it took me longer to learn Mbendjee, but as a result, what I learnt about Mbendjele culture has only been biased by me, rather than additionally compounded by the bias of a *Bilo* delayed-return world view.

### **Thesis outline**

This thesis looks at various dimensions of sharing in the domains of collective emotions and cultural knowledge in an egalitarian society. I demonstrate throughout this thesis that -in the Mbendjele context- the notion of sharing is applied not only to materials (e.g. tools, objects, food) but also to non-material cultural productions such as valued sensations, positive and negative emotions and musical

performance. *Massana* performances are Mbendjele's privileged ways for sharing valued non-material social products, and the ethnography presented demonstrates the significance of sharing emotionally for establishing the group as a solid social unit. This thesis is divided in six chapters that explore the various dimensions of sharing in Mbendjele society, using data from the villages of Bonguinda, Sendébumu, Djoubé and Bangui-Motaba in the Likouala region of the RoC.

Chapter 1 looks at the distinctive characteristics of egalitarianism as a political system, to show that sharing practices are at the heart of what distinguishes egalitarian societies from all the others. The chapter then move on to focus on Pygmies' philosophy of music to highlight the importance of collective musical performances in the practice of egalitarianism. The role of the Mbendjele institution *massana* -which is the main focus of this thesis, is then outlined to show the extent to which sharing can be considered as a religious practice, a playful activity and a collective bodily experience.

Chapter 2 explores the processes of cultural transmission and looks at the way egalitarian values of sharing are transmitted through the analysis of children's games. The analysis then moves on to investigate the domain of emotions in the Mbendjele context. The ethnography emphasises the 'collectiveness' of emotions and the high value Mbendjele attribute to the process of sharing collective emotions. The third section focuses on the processes by which collective sharing is embodied in the practice of music and dance as an emotionally charged and collective bodily experience.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the musical act in *massana* performances and an analysis of the internal structure of Mbendjele music. Beginning with a description of the ground rules of the Mbendjele's rhythmic structure, the chapter illustrates the dynamics of musicians' relationships with each other during musical performances. An examination of the structure and types of singing then shows to what extent the non-musical elements of a performance condition the internal structure of vocal music. I also describe the use of four melodic instruments which participate to the collective sharing of joy and positive emotions throughout the community.

Chapter 4 focuses on forest spirit performances and consider the aesthetics of sharing. First emphasising some key performative elements of forest spirit *massana*

the presentation then considers the manufacture and use of forest spirits' clothing, in order to highlight the importance of visual aesthetics in the process of sharing the valued social productions in *massana* performances. Ethnographic vignettes illustrate, the influence of individual characters and personalities on the type of collective emotions shared in forest spirit performances. An analysis of two mythical stories follows, to illustrate the dynamics between resilience and innovation in performance.

Chapter 5 considers sharing through the prism of women's exercise of power in Mbendjele society. Women's forest spirit performances are presented through detailed ethnographic descriptions of the way egalitarianism is constructed around the ritualized opposition of genders. An examination of how intra-gender solidarity is built through the sharing of laughter and the collective assessment of power in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) follows, with. a consideration of sexuality in women's performances, and an analysis of men's role in the attribution of power to both genders.

Chapter 6 explores the dimensions of sharing on a large scale i.e. the events for which the community as a whole is compelled to share bodily experiences. Beginning with a particularly beautiful set of performances, the chapter illustrates the value Mbendjele attribute to the collective and performative sharing of beauty. An analysis of one particular collective performance then provides evidence for the weight and importance of collective and performative sharing dynamics in Mbendjele's practice of egalitarianism.

# Chapter 1:

## The Egalitarian society

The practice of egalitarianism and the role of *massana* performances in  
Mbendjele society

“Denaturalizing equality requires that we place it on the same plane as inequality -a product of sociocultural mechanisms- and that we treat each as an ethnographic phenomenon requiring both description and explanation.”

Flanagan (1989: 261)

### Introduction

Egalitarianism is a practice as much as an ideology (Woodburn 1982). Several authors highlighted the importance of the use of the body in hunter-gatherers' egalitarian societies (e.g. Finnegan 2013) as well as the ways political power is framed by a subtle balance between genders (e.g. Bieseke 1993; Kisliuk 1998). In the Mbendjele context, egalitarianism is embodied by individuals through musical and playful performances obeying the strict rules of the institution *massana* (Lewis 2002).

This chapter explores Mbendjele egalitarian principles, with a particular focus on the institution of *massana*, to show that it lies at the core of the Mbendjele's practice of egalitarianism. This first part identifies the anthropological concepts which

frame my analysis with a review of anthropological studies on egalitarian societies, before looking at the Mbendjele's mechanisms of sharing with an emphasis on demand-sharing. The chapter then moves on to forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), which are the main focus of this thesis.

### **Egalitarianism in practice**

The Mbendjele of the RoC are one of the rare populations in the world who have managed to perpetuate an egalitarian way of life and to resist successive external influences. Woodburn pointed out that egalitarian systems "have shown themselves to be remarkably stable and resistant to change in their mode of operation both in the past and in the present" (Woodburn 2005: 19). This section explores egalitarian ideology and practice, and places the Mbendjele's institutions in perspective by situating them in broader discussions on hunter-gatherers' egalitarianism. First, I identify egalitarian principles, mainly grounding my approach on Woodburn's (1980; 1982; 2005) and Lewis's (2002; 2008; 2014; 2015) extensive studies of egalitarianism in hunter-gatherer societies, before looking at sharing practices and their mechanisms.

### **Egalitarianism as a political and economic system**

Sahlins refuted the existence of a 'truly' egalitarian society when he wrote that "theoretically, an egalitarian society would be one in which every individual is of equal status, a society in which no one outranks anyone. But even the most primitive societies could not be described as egalitarian in this sense" (1958: 1). Similarly, in Fried's model, "an egalitarian society is one in which there are as many positions of prestige in any given age-sex grade as there are persons capable of filling them" (Fried 1967: 33).

Despite the apparent equality of all individuals suggested by Sahlins and Fried's models of egalitarianism, Woodburn pointed out that in egalitarian societies, equality is not neutral, but assertive (1982). Lewis used Woodburn's findings to analyze Mbendjele's economic and political system to show that "egalitarianism is not a passive state. It is an assertive, dynamic process that depends on a complex of

interdependent practices that constantly resist the emergence of hierarchy, dependency, and inequality” (Lewis 2014: 229).

Leacock & Lee identified ‘core features’ common to all foragers’ egalitarian societies: the collective ownership of the means of production, the right for all individuals to enjoy a direct access to resources, a little emphasis on accumulation, the social and ideological imperative to share, the access to skills and knowledge within the community and the individual ownership of tools (Leacock & Lee 1982: 8-9).

In his model of egalitarian specificities, Woodburn added two features to Sahlins’s reference to gender and age equality and to Leacock & Lee’s list: an unparalleled individual autonomy and an important territorial mobility. Finnegan noted that Woodburn understood egalitarian societies as “perpetually balanced on the fine line between autonomy and connectedness” (Finnegan 2013: 701).

Woodburn’s focus on egalitarian forms of social organization and his use of theoretical models to categorize societies and to allow selective comparisons helped me to better understand Mbendjele’s political and economic system. Woodburn’s typology distinguishes two types of economic systems, the *immediate-return* system and the *delayed-return* system. The *immediate-return* system is based on individual access to resources, generalized sharing, and strong social pressure to prevent individuals from controlling or accumulating goods. Referring to the Hadza, Woodburn explains that “encumbrances are unacceptable and people do not take on even short-term commitments which might provide a few additional days of desirable food” (Woodburn 1980: 100). On the opposite side of Woodburn’s spectrum, *delayed-return* systems are characterized by hierarchy and the accumulation of property and of surplus. Woodburn’s typology shows that only *immediate-return* systems allow an egalitarian social organization and identifies sharing as one of its core and defining features.

Mbendjele society can be categorized as immediate-return and egalitarian according to Woodburn’s typology. Lewis (2014: 222) argued that “the difference between immediate- and delayed-return societies goes well beyond economics to determine key aspects of social structure and political organization”. Lewis refers here to the accumulation of goods, which, in delayed-return societies, inevitably creates inequalities between individuals, and leads to wealthy individuals having authority on

less wealthy individuals. In contrast, in egalitarian societies “pressure is not put on people to produce, but on them to share whatever they have produced” (*ibid.*). This imperative moral and social pressure to share is manifest in the practice of demand-sharing, which prevents excess accumulation (Lewis 2015: 2).

Lewis recently summarized the underlying principles of Mbendjele egalitarian system and sharing practices as follows:

“Living in such a society is like living in a place where goods are free. If you do not have what you need, you simply look around to see who might have it and ask them for it. If it is a tool or object, when you have finished with it, they or someone else may ask you for the item again, and so it continues to travel around the community. If it is food, people will politely help themselves to the meal that you are eating” (Lewis 2014: 227).

The emphasis put on individual autonomy is central to the Mbendjele egalitarian political organisation. The highly negative value attributed to dominance prevents the emergence of leaders through various levelling mechanisms. Boehm noted that “egalitarianism behaviour arises from dislike of being dominated” (1993: 236) and, in Mbendjele society, the methodical refusal of dominant leadership is asserted in everyday life.

It can be argued that the “dislike of being dominated” is not characteristic of an egalitarian system because it can be observed in hierarchical societies as well. Beattie described several cases of African kings whose power was strongly limited and controlled by their followers (1967). The Western form of revolution similarly constitutes a levelling mechanism which offers followers some control on their leaders (Lopreato & Green 1990). Yet in Mbendjele society the battle against dominance is consistent enough to result in a *quasi-absence* of political leadership. First because several levelling mechanisms (which will be described in this thesis) prevent the appearance of authoritarian leaders, second because Mbendjele ‘leaders’ do not exercise any authority.

The institution *moadjo* acts as an important levelling mechanism in the process of preventing the rise of authoritarian leadership. During a *moadjo*, a woman -more often an elder- publicly mimic someone’s inappropriate and reprovved actions. Such action can be a tendency to give orders to people, to try to dominate one’s wife or husband or a tendency to be aggressive. In a stylised way using a theatrical

language, the woman turns the inappropriate behaviour into ridicule, in order to bring shame on the culprit and to publicly express her criticism. Ridicule can be considered after Boehm as a special form of criticism which “threatens a leader’s status because he cannot lead without respect” (Boehm 1993: 230). Shame acts as a buffer to bring the culprit back to the level of his peers. As the audience laugh during a *moadjo*, all markers of potential superiority are reversed and neutralized. Ridicule is used as an anti-dominance tool outside of the *moadjo* context as well, in everyday life, and can be used by women and men, adults and children indifferently. Every attempt of individuals or groups to exercise authority or control over the others is systematically countered by public ridicule or open criticism.

This systematic disapproval of authoritarian leadership is not however incompatible with the approval of other forms of leadership. Boehm showed that “people who exhibit egalitarian behaviour are not opposed to leadership per se, indeed, they value it so long as the benefits outweigh the penalties” (1993: 236). Among the Mbendjele, some individuals fill the role of charismatic leaders. These are the master-hunter (*tuma*), the traditional healer (*ngānga*) and the wise elder (*kombeti*). These specialists are respected for their wisdom and can be considered as political leaders only in the sense that people tend to follow their advice. Yet they are not allowed by their followers to exercise any kind of authority on them, because it would go against the strong imperative to retain individual autonomy. It has been demonstrated that the weakness of leaders’ powers is a defining characteristic of egalitarian societies, along with little ranking or stratification (Flanagan & Rayner 1988). The existence of non-authoritarian leaders highlights the Mbendjele egalitarian ethic, as individuals with the ‘higher’ social status (*kombeti*) are nonetheless equal to their followers in every domain. They are expected to share as much as if not more than the others and their status has more to do with responsibility than with any kind of privilege or economic advantage.

As chapter 5 will demonstrate, institutions which build on the tensions between genders prevent domination of one individual or group on the others through ritual performance. Such levelling mechanisms demonstrate the active intention to minimize hierarchy in Mbendjele society. As Boehm emphasised, “the primary and most immediate cause of egalitarian behaviour is a moralistic determination on the part of a local group’s main political actors that no one of its members should be



allowed to dominate the others” (Boehm 1993: 228). In the Mbendjele context, every member of a community is a “main political actor” who deliberately acts to eradicate authoritarian behaviour when it arises through ridicule, open criticism, the performance of forest spirit rituals and demand-sharing.

Woodburn’s typology of egalitarian societies and Lewis’ observations on Mbendjele egalitarianism offered valuable insights which shaped my understanding and pushed me to look at sharing practices in more detail. In this dissertation, I focus on the various distinctive ways that the Mbendjele share in practice and how sharing practices are conceived in relation to individuals’ freedom and responsibilities towards the community. The following section will show how the well-known egalitarian practices of sharing described above are manifest in everyday life in an Mbendjele context.

### **Egalitarian sharing practices**

Peterson noted a “reported ethic of generosity” common to hunter-gatherers’ societies (Peterson 1993: 171), and showed that, alongside a positive moral imperative to share, “much giving and sharing is in response to direct verbal or non-verbal demands” (*ibid.*: 172). The obligation to share in egalitarian societies has been described as being ‘forced’ on people, as Lewis talked about the “procedures that *force sharing* on anyone with more than they can immediately consume and so prevent saving and accumulation” (Lewis 2014: 223, emphasis mine). Finnegan also emphasised that among Mbendjele and other forest hunter-gatherers, “every last cigarette is shared out; every string of beads distributed” (Finnegan 2013: 709), in a way that cannot be avoided. Lewis also showed how social pressure is practiced as “people who brag or try to assert their wishes or views on others are mercilessly teased, fought, avoided, and, if they persist, even exiled” (Lewis 2014: 225).

Lewis (2008) discussed the rules of sharing implied by the Mbendjele’s concept of *ekila*<sup>10</sup>, and highlighted the extent of sharing to every domain of individuals’ lives:

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<sup>10</sup> According to Lewis (2008), the concept of *ekila* is shared by other central African Pygmy groups (Lewis 2008: 297)

“*Ekila* defines how the body’s vital forces, reproductive potential, productive activities and their products, moral and personal qualities, and emotions should be shared so as to ensure that group members experience good health, unproblematic childbirth and child-rearing, and successful hunting and gathering. From an Mbendjele perspective these are the basic components of a good life” (Lewis 2008: 299).

Sharing is described as being one of the central elements of people’s happiness, and ‘a good life’ could not be achieved without the positive moral imperative to share according to the rules implied by *ekila*. Refusal to share is considered by the Mbendjele to be “impolite, even offensive” (Lewis 2014: 7).

Lomax emphasised that among Bushmen and central African Pygmies, members of the community lived “in close interdependence by *preference* and not by force” (Lomax 1976: 38, emphasis mine). Similarly, Lewis showed that in Pygmies’ egalitarian society, “no one can *force* others to do their will” (Lewis 2002: 5, emphasis mine). Sharing is highly valued by Mbendjele who often say that they have “easy hands” emphasising through this expression the facility with which they give away goods when asked (Lewis 2002: 9). If sharing is such a core feature of egalitarian ideology and practice among hunter-gatherers, I wonder with Peterson why “recipients often have to demand generosity?” (Peterson 1993: 860)

### **Demand-sharing, affective-sharing and forced-sharing**

The practice of demand-sharing has been looked at by several anthropologists (Blurton-Jones 1987; Ickikawa 2005; Lewis 2014; Peterson 1993; Widlok 2013; Woodburn 1982; 1998) and described as ensuring egalitarian economic relations. Lewis showed that it is *need* which determines the sharing of an item (Lewis 2014:7). It follows that need is what makes a demand legitimate and ultimately determines rules of sharing. Using Lewis’ insights and my own ethnography, I refine our understanding of sharing practices in egalitarian societies as I look at the legitimacy of demands in sharing situations, and at the different forms of sharing in Mbendjele society.

Lewis showed that among the Mbendjele, sharing practices are gendered as “Mbendjele men and women share in different ways” (2014: 7). When women go to look for wild yams in the forest, they first share between themselves what they found

before coming back to the village, sharing again with their friends and relatives before sharing a third time once the food is cooked. Every evening, dozens of plates are sent around the camp or village, as women share their food with their relatives and friends without being asked to do so<sup>11</sup>. According to Lewis, men have a different way of sharing as they can potentially produce large amounts of food:

“If a hunter returns with a large animal, it is publically taken from him as he enters camp by other men. They supervise the butchering and ensure the sharing is done equitably before being cooked and further redistributed by the women as they do with other food” (Lewis 2014: 7)

These sharing mechanisms within and between gender groups are designed to prevent favouritism and manipulation (*ibid.*). Alongside with gender differentiations, Lewis identified three levels of sharing: within the household, within the camp and within the community (Lewis 2002: 241). This distinction usually corresponds in practice to a) sharing within the nuclear family, b) sharing with relatives and friends and c) sharing with Mbendjele neighbours in the case of big game hunting and forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*)<sup>12</sup>.

In order to enrich Lewis' descriptions, I summarise these various levels of sharing by proposing a distinction according to the legitimacy of demands (i.e. the acknowledgment of a real need) while looking at situations in which goods are not shared<sup>13</sup>. Building on Lewis' analysis, I describe the three egalitarian sharing strategies that compensate each other as follows: *demand-sharing*, *forced-sharing* and *affective-sharing*.

Lewis argued that in Mbendjele society, “demand-sharing is recipient controlled ... It is the donor's duty to give whatever they are requested” (Lewis 2014: 225). Demand-sharing is done in public and is legitimate, which means that the person demanding is in need and the person asked has enough to share. But in frequent occasions, the demand is considered illegitimate by the donor and the item is not shared.

I present here several ethnographic vignettes which demonstrate how demands can be legitimate and accepted, illegitimate and refused, or forced against the donor's

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis offered an account of similar practices among women (Lewis 2014 : 7).

<sup>12</sup> An example of a large sharing during a *matānga* commemoration in Sendebumu is provided in chapter 6.

<sup>13</sup> In the present discussion, I voluntarily ignore what is traded in Mbendjele society, namely secret and magic knowledge linked to spirit-guardianship, in order to focus on sharing practices related to goods which can be shared freely. I will discuss the trading of forest spirit-guardianship later on in this chapter.

will. I also show how affective-sharing acts as a levelling mechanism which softens the violence of demand-sharing and forced-sharing, to ensure the continuous circulation of goods within the community.

**When the demand is accepted:** Modiembe visited her friend Ai one late afternoon. Ai had just come back from Sendébumu, where her friend Embe had given her palm kernel oil (*madi mo ndika*). She had finished giving her baby boy Lendi his evening bath, and was massaging him with the oil when Modiembe arrived. Modiembe saw the large amount of oil Ai had, and asked her for some. She sent her son to her house to get a plastic box and Ai gave her around a third of her oil.

**When the demand is refused:** Mwasi (an eighteen-year-old woman) was cooking wild yams (*mela*) with fish in the early afternoon in Makana (a forest fishing camp). She asked her grand-mother Mateke for some salt. Mateke only had a tiny amount of salt which she needed for her own food and she refused to share. She told Mwasi that she had several girlfriends in the camp, and that she could ask them instead. Mwasi accused her grand-mother of being a liar pretending to run out of salt when she probably had more. Mwasi complained to her mother Ai, telling her that Mateke was refusing to share (*abia me!* litt. “she refused me/my demand”). Ai supported her daughter and asked Mateke to share (*bokabwe*) some of her salt, but the latter maintained her refusal and ignored the demand. Mwasi made a scene before another woman elder of the camp, Maus, offered to settle the situation by giving Mwasi a bit of salt from her small reserve.

**Forced-sharing:** Later that day, Mateke had finished cooking her meal, and was about to eat her small plate of food when Annie and Tokabe (Mwasi’s sisters) took the plate from her and ate everything. Mateke protested, calling the girls thieves (*baiba me yoma! Baana badika me na nzala!* Lit. “They stole my food! Children left me with hunger!”), but the food was all gone in a few seconds, leaving Mateke with nothing.

**Affective-sharing:** The same day, when Ai cooked the family’s evening meal, she sent a large plate to Mateke, and Annie and Tokabe came to eat with her, this time rigorously sharing the plate in three equal parts.

This ethnographic vignette shows how hard it is to refuse to share when asked explicitly. Mateke tried to keep her salt for herself, and in the end she lost her salt *and* her meal through forced-sharing. What I call ‘affective-sharing’ is the type of sharing which allowed Mateke to eat thanks to Ai’s offering of food. Gaining access to a resource or item (in this case food) through demand-sharing sometimes create an imbalance when the receiver and the donor’s needs are not equivalent. Affective-sharing is a way to cope with the problems created by demand-sharing in such situations, and to ensure that ultimately, even in the cases where demands are refused, material products are shared. Open refusal to share (as Mateke did) is only one of the ways Mbendjele avoid parting from their goods.

Another way to refuse to share is to hide the wanted item. But this does not mean that the item will not be shared eventually. It means that the owner of the item wants to selectively share with his or her relatives and friends, and not just randomly with anyone who happens to be around or ask. Ata, an elder woman of Nyemu’s clan, taught me how to share affectively by discretely hiding things I wanted to share before giving them surreptitiously to the persons I liked best. Hiding does not prevent people from sharing, but it allows them to avoid sharing randomly. If an item is hidden, it cannot be refused because its existence is unknown.

Let us now focus on the sharing of non-material social products. An individual asking for food invokes his need to eat to claim a share. Similarly, an individual asking for a drum invokes his need of joy and his need of collectively sharing this joy. The following ethnographic vignette illustrates the dynamics of demand-sharing, forced-sharing and affective-sharing when applied to valued non-material products. This example shows how types of sharing contradict and/or compensate each other, and illustrates the ways different types of sharing participate in the creation of the necessary conditions for the effective sharing and management of collective emotions.

**Forced-sharing:** In April 2014, Bale called his *Edjengi mokondi* (forest spirit) in Bonguinda. The performance was going well, until an elder woman arrived and claimed her drum back. She said that this drum was nice and that people always took it from her (through demand-sharing). Consequently, every time her children wanted to call their spirits, they could not play their drum because it was with

someone else. The performance immediately stopped, and Bale apologized to the elder woman. The drum was given back to her, and a young man helped her to carry it back to her house. Bale put the other plastic drums down, and made them roll on the side of his house to show that he submitted to the elder woman's will. People staged the ending of the performance, and yet nobody left. A few young men started ostensibly to carve a thick trunk already shaped as a drum, frequently looking in the direction of the elder woman's house to see if she had noticed. They were trying to show that they did not have a proper drum of their own yet but that they were working on it to avoid further troubles. By carving the drum-shaped trunk, men emphasized their *need* of the drum, and through this the legitimacy of their demand.

Women were still standing, waiting for the performance to start again. "People are in need of *massana*!" (*bato badie na posa na massana!*) someone shouted. A man went to the elder woman's house to ask again for the drum she had recovered only minutes before. Because the demand was legitimate and made in public, the elder woman could not refuse and she shared her drum again. Singing and dancing started again and *Edjengi* performed for a few moments. Suddenly, men took the spirit back to the sacred path and all disappeared. Hearing men coming from a distance carrying *Libongu* (*Edjengi's* clothing), women all sat down together, and watched the men's performance attentively.

The men walked in front of the women walking at the same pace, singing *esime* songs. Discretely, women were exchanging comments on men's *Libongu* performance. They did not like men's *esime* songs, and told themselves that women did much better *esime*. The lyrics of men's song were *muānda atānga*, lit. "the blood has guessed". Hearing the song, women put on despising faces and pretended to turn a blind eye on men's message. Women's attitude became clearer when I understood what this was about.

After men's *Libongu* performance, women explained to me that men were talking about menstrual blood (*muānda*). Husbands wanted to have sex with their wives because they were menstruating, and women disapproved but had to let men express themselves and deliver their message without intervening. Lewis' work on

*ekila*<sup>14</sup> among Mbendjele showed that Mbendjele men consider that women are most fertile during menstruation. “Sexual intercourse at this time is widely held to be a sure way of ensuring pregnancy begins” (Lewis 2002: 109). Men needed the old woman’s drum to call *Edjengi* and use *Libongu* (procession of men carrying *Edjengi*’s leaves) to express and assert men’s desire for sexual intercourse during menstruation.

Women needed the old woman’s drum because they wanted to hear men’s message. Women nevertheless have a very different conception of reproductive processes. During trips in the forest to look for wild yams and edible leaves, I often discussed with women about reproductive activities such as fecundation, pregnancy or birth giving. Each mother remembers clearly how she got pregnant for each of her children, and most of the times men are absent. Ai told me how she got pregnant with Tokabe, her third daughter, and Mélanie followed by telling how she got pregnant with Mongi, her only child:

*Ai, forty-years-old woman from Bonguinda, December 2013:*

“One day I decided to go fishing. I was walking in the forest, looking for new ponds, when I heard a baby cry. I followed the sound and arrived in front of a large tree [*koko a mele*, litt. “grand-father/mother of a tree”]. It was like the baby was crying from inside the tree. I came closer and closer from the tree, and the cries stopped. I encircled the tree with my arms, like this [she demonstrates with a tree, extending her arms and legs around the tree and pressing her body against the bark]. I put my ear against the bark to listen. And then, Boo-o! Hu. I was pregnant with Tokabe.”

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<sup>14</sup> Described by Lewis (2002; 2008), *ekila* practices structure people’s lives and relationship with the environment (the forest, the animals, the spirits –good and bad), and relationships with each other. Each human carefully guards his *ekila*, from the time he can walk, throughout his life and until his death. *Ekila* ensures a man with success in hunting, and a woman with success in child bearing and child birth. Hunting and gendered reproductive activities are the core of *ekila* practices, which are known to be “difficult to understand without a good deal of contextual knowledge and experience” (Lewis 2002: 103). At the time of my fieldwork among the Mbendjele, I was on my own (without my partner) and did not have children. Being a woman, I rarely went hunting, and was not concerned with child bearing or birth giving problems. I therefore did not have a chance to have a grip on *ekila* practices, which stayed invisible to me most of the time. A few events as the one described here nevertheless gave me some clues on people’s relation to *ekila*. Because of my somewhat twisted status of an adult woman, married but living away from her husband, with no child despite my ‘old age’ (I was twenty-six -years -old at the time of my arrival when women usually have their first child around eighteen –years -old), I limit my approach of *ekila* practices to descriptions, and try when possible to use Lewis’s insights on that matter (Lewis 2002, chapter 4: 103-123; 2008).

*Mélanie, fifty-years-old woman from Bonguinda, December 2013:*

“When I got pregnant with Mongi, it was because of a fish. You know how I like to fish with poisoning fruits [*yoko*]. So I had found some fruits, had prepared them in the camp, and then I went to the pond on my own. I started to mix the fruits in the water to send fish to sleep. A huge fish came out of the water, mouth opening and closing, his eyes looking at me. I stepped backwards, I was so scared! And then he went back to the water. Me, I was pregnant with Mongi.

[Mwasi: did you continue fishing?]

No! I rushed back to the camp as fast as I could!”

At another occasion, Pélagie told me how a red antelope (*musome*) came into the forest camp and got her pregnant with his visit. According to Lewis, red animals are often considered *ekila*. I cannot discuss *ekila* practices in depth for the reasons I explained above, but because of the gendered opposition of conceptions around menstrual blood associated to *ekila* rules, men’s need to deliver their message was strong enough to be legitimate, and justify the obligation to share the drum.

This example introduces the complexity of the sharing dynamics involved when it comes to non-material social products. The drum was shared (through demand-sharing when refused through forced-sharing) so that performers could share positive emotions and the joy of *massana*, which then allowed the men to share their discontent vis-à-vis women’s refusal to have sex. This example describes several levels of sharing, compensating each other to ultimately allow the enjoyment of “sharing for its own sake” (Widlok 2004: 61). In the context of *massana* activities, emotions are a central element which facilitates the sharing dynamics by creating the right conditions for more sharing, and by focusing people’s efforts towards a common goal (joy and other valued positive emotions).

Mbendjele’s system of “demand-sharing” therefore does not necessarily always involve ‘demand’ or ‘sharing’ in each situation as these examples illustrate. Mateke refused to share, and then was given food without demanding. The ground rules underlying sharing practices prevent individuals from escaping the act of sharing as Mateke was ‘stolen’ her food by Annie and Tokabe as a consequence of her refusal



to share salt. Yet the same people who snatched from Mateke came to share food with her a few hours later. Sharing is pressed on people in such a way that it is very hard to escape, and affective-sharing creates occasions for people to share willingly without being asked, which facilitates the circulation of food and goods within the community.

The ethnography of the sharing of food and material goods among the Mbendjele presented above demonstrates that demand-sharing is only one of the ways people share. In some situations there is not enough to share or there is a conflict of equivalent needs between the donor and the receiver, and demand-sharing becomes inadequate. People's demands are occasionally refused, and the Mbendjele dynamics of sharing offer two levelling ways of sharing (forced-sharing and affective-sharing) which compensate the inappropriateness of demand-sharing in some situations. Following an emphasis on the different ways that things are shared in Mbendjele society, the next section will further explore how non-food items and non-physical objects are shared through a discussion of the institution *massana*. The next two sections explore the concept of *massana* in the broad perspective of Central African Pygmies' ritual economy, and in the detailed ethnography of Mbendjele practice. In order to do so, and in addition to my own observations on the Mbendjele of Bonguinda, I rely heavily on Lewis's extensive study of Mbendjele and BaYaka populations' ritual performances and religious system. I also use other authors' detailed ethnographies of Pygmies' musical performances in order to emphasize *massana*'s status as privileged locus for Mbendjele's egalitarian practice.

### **The role of *massana* performances in Mbendjele's egalitarian social and political organisation**

Several populations of western Pygmies share a common ritual economy. Lewis observed profound similarities in the practice of musical performances of the Aka of the CAR and RoC, the Baka in the RoC, Cameroon and Gabon; the Bongo in Gabon and the RoC, as well as the Luma, Mbendjele, Mikaya and Ngombe in the RoC (Lewis 2015: 1-2). Like sharing, participation in this ritual economy is an "important

emic marker identifying Bayaka (forest hunter-gatherer) people as opposed to ‘*bilu*’ farming people” (*ibid.*). This ritual economy called *massana* by the Mbendjele is central to the practice of egalitarianism and is a privileged space for the manifestations of sharing at a collective level. Multiple variations can be found when comparing Pygmy groups, but the underlying rules of musicking and the aesthetics of the musical performances share a common basis. In this section, I examine the ideology behind *massana* performances by looking at BaYaka’s distinctive conceptions of music and music-making. I then move on to the Mbendjele institution *massana* to identify the key characteristics of these activities.

### **Pygmy’s philosophy of music**

The Mbendjele, like many other Pygmy groups, spend a significant amount of time practicing music and dance. Various musical activities are performed by all members of the communities throughout the year, which makes music omnipresent in Mbendjele camps and villages. Scholars working with Pygmy groups all noticed the high significance of musical practice in these societies. Rouget was the first to use the term ‘*musiquer*’ to describe Pygmies’ intense and daily practice of music and dance (Rouget 1980). He borrowed the term from the French writers Diderot and Rousseau and adapted its definition, coming closer to what American scholars call ‘performance’. ‘*Musiquer*’ was then translated in English into ‘musicking’ in Small’s work (Small 1998).

‘Musicking’ covers well the idea that, in Pygmies’ cultures, making music and the act of dancing are often inseparable (Rouget 2004: 28). The term ‘musicking’ emphasises both the action of making music and the musical product, and highlights what makes Pygmies’ practice of music so different from their *Bilo* neighbours’ and western music.

The term ‘musicking’ has been criticized by Kaeppler, for whom “practitioners themselves may not be ‘musicking’ or ‘dancing’ (concepts derived from our own western tradition) but rather ‘ritually intoning and moving’ (though using the same or different sound and movement system)” (Kaeppler, 2010: 270). Kaeppler’s expression introduces the notion of religion through the use of the term ‘ritually’,

which does not fit Pygmies' conceptions of musical performances, sometimes described as 'entertainment' or 'play' (Kisliuk 1998; Lewis 2002). Kaeppler's proposition replaces 'singing' by 'intoning' and 'dancing' by 'moving', which takes away the cultural conceptions of sound and movement to turn actions into a neutral state. I do not follow Kaeppler and prefer Rouget's expression which, as will be developed shortly, is a term which better reflects Pygmy's conceptions of the musical act.

Despite the relevance of Rouget's term 'musicking' in a BaYaka context, I prefer to use the term performance to talk about Mbendjele's *massana* activities. First, because Rouget considered the two terms equivalent, second because, despite Rouget's conception, the term 'musicking' puts the emphasis on music at the expense of dance, and third because the term 'performance' allows me to affiliate my work to performance studies' approaches and methods (Schechner 2013). The terms 'musicking' and 'performance' are used in the same sense throughout this dissertation.

In BaYaka's conception of music, the act of making music is of primary importance as it concerns the community's survival. Ethnomusicological studies on musicking among Pygmies showed that a large part of BaYaka's musical repertoires and corresponding dances are closely bound to hunting, which is Pygmies' main livelihood (Rouget 2004: 27). The forest is seen as a living being which 'opens' or 'closes' according to people's behaviour (Lewis 2006:17). Pygmies share a common concern to please the forest and the spirits who populate it, as the nomadic hunting and gathering way of life relies heavily on the forest environment (Bahuchet 1991). Olivier & Färniss for example showed that the majority of Aka's musical repertoires are related and deeply structured by hunting (Färniss & Olivier 1999:119-123).

Among the Batwa of the DRC (Equateur Province), even though traditional musical practices were nearly extinct at the time of my visit, I found traces of this shared conception. My lack of proficiency in the Batwa language did not allow me to investigate further, but I recorded some older Batwa songs<sup>15</sup>. When I played these recordings to my Mbendjele friends in the RoC and showed them videos, they immediately recognized the songs. They were able to translate the lyrics so that I

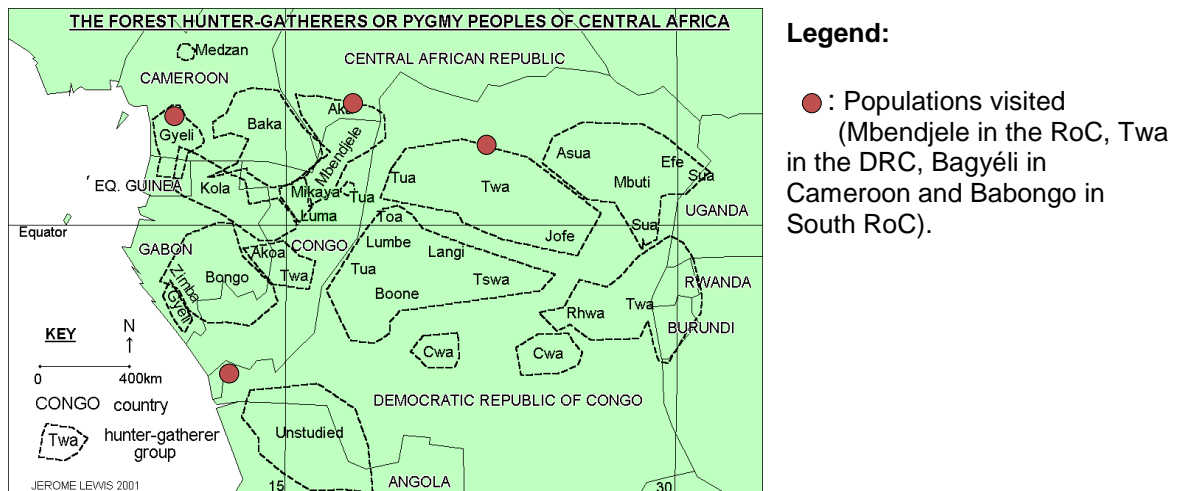
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<sup>15</sup> See appendix 2 n°1 & 2.

could understand the theme of the songs, and even told me the function and social context of the songs.

One of these Batwa songs is called “lying” (*okose*), and the Mbendjele told me that it is performed before hunting to bring luck to hunters. According to the Mbendjele, another song was from a women’s spirit performance, and is called “my things” (*ya moenda*). When I asked them, Mbendjele immediately associated these recordings with *massana* activities. The distance that separates the Mbendjele and Batwa (see figure 3) shows that Pygmy groups, despite long periods of isolation, still share a common conception of musicking. Lewis had a similar experience, as he played some of Turnbull’s 1950s recordings of Mbuti songs to the southern Mbendjele, who exclaimed: “They must be BaYaka since they sing just like us!” (Lewis 2013: 53).

In several Pygmy groups’ conception, the forest is highly sensitive to sounds, and reacts to positive or negative sounds in ways which directly affect people’s lives (Joiris & Fürniss 2010). Music -and singing in particular- are considered to “bear strong spiritual power” (*ibid.*: 1) among the Baka of Cameroon, but also among the Mbuti of the DRC and Aka of the CAR and RoC. The Mbendjele say that the forest likes the music and laughter (“good sounds”) produced by humans (*ndima adinga*), and that by enchanting the forest they encourage it to open up and to enable humans to access its resources. What Mbendjele describe as “bad sounds” (*motoko*) are sounds produced by fights, arguments, or simply the absence of good sounds. “*Motoko* noises are the product of discord, stress, pain, suffering, an absence of cooperation, of sharing in the widest sense, and chaos from an Mbendjele perspective” (Lewis 2006: 17). “Bad sounds” close up the forest to the community and directly affect people’s ability to find food.



**Figure 3:** Map of Pygmy populations of the Congo Basin (Lewis 2002: 48)

Sources: Thomas 1979; Schultz 1991; Joiris 1998; Köhler 1998; Barume 2000

Bahuchet showed that, for the Aka of the CAR, the spirits of the ancestors, who wander in the forest, are pushed away by disorder, arguments, disputes and physical violence. Emotions such as wickedness, anger, resentment or hate lead to the dissolution of the community's life because they attract malevolence (Bahuchet 1995: 63). Negative sounds such as cries or people arguing are the visible symptoms of negative emotions felt by individuals, and have a direct consequence on the forest's willingness to sustain people with food in abundance. Bahuchet talked about what Aka call 'kose', an evil force which manifests in the malevolence people have for each other (*ibid.*: 62).

Turnbull's study of the Mbuti of the RDC showed that the importance and power of singing resides in the sound itself (Turnbull CD 1991). About the Mbuti performances associated to honey harvesting, Turnbull wrote that the songs and dances were the symbols of life itself (Turnbull 1963: 138), and that the Mbuti used music as a way of making the forest happy (Turnbull 1991: 80). Similarly, Rouget said that, for the BaNgombe Pygmies of the RoC, songs and dances aim at insuring hunting success and/or the forest's indulgence to sustain them with sufficient food (Rouget 2004: 27).

Music is thus, for the Aka and for most Pygmy groups, the main medium for maintaining harmony within the society (Bahuchet & Thomas 1991: 181). My Mbendjele informants say that a healthy community is one in which *massana* activities occur regularly on a daily basis, and were good sounds (laughter, nice conversations and beautiful music) prevail over negative sounds (such as dispute or fights). In the time I spent in Bonguinda, I never heard complaints about people

doing “too much” *massana*. On the contrary, people often openly complain about the lack of *massana* activities, and wise elders (*kombeti*) often encourage people to perform *massana*. Likewise, Arom emphasized the omnipresence of music among the Aka of the CAR (Arom & Dehoux 1978). Each Mbendjele individual constantly feels a need for *massana* activities, because, for the Mbendjele like for the Baka of Cameroon, Aka of the CAR and RoC, or Mbuti of the DRC, the community’s well-being depends on the performance of these activities.

Lewis pointed out that the Mbendjele “are very concerned with pleasing the forest” (2006: 17) since, like other Pygmy groups described above, the music, laughter and other “good sounds” the Mbendjele produce have a direct impact on their relationship with their environment. Bird-David observed among other immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies such as the Nayaka what she called a “cosmic economy of sharing”, an emic system that embraces both human-to-human and nature-to-human sharing (1992: 30). Bird-David analysis showed that sharing is

“a metaphorical concept by which [hunter-gatherers] make sense of their environment, one that guides their actions within it. Through their close interaction with the environment they have come to perceive it, and act with it, as with a friend, a relative, a parent who shares resources with them” (Bird-David 1992: 31).

By sharing good sounds with the forest, the Mbendjele aim at maintaining a healthy relationship with their environment. Share with the forest ensures that the forest will share its resources with humans, and *massana* activities are the Mbendjele privileged ways to produce and share good sounds with humans present, with the forest and with all the entities populating the forest. “In the same way that Mbendjele listen to the forest in order to know about it, the forest is listening to them in order to know about them. Just as the animals are responsive to Mbendjele sound-making; by coming to them to facilitate capture or attacking them, so is the forest providing abundantly or with-holding food” (Lewis 2006: 17). It follows that, in Mbendjele communities, *massana* activities happen on a daily basis and take various shapes, and are all based on the same principles: *Cooperate collectively in order to produce beauty and ensure the community’s well-being by pleasing the forest. Massana is a serious matter to the Mbendjele, and children’s games are as important to them as forest spirit rituals because these activities produce good sounds.*

Anthropological descriptions of musicking among Pygmies showed common specificities: most of the time, the whole society participates to performances; singing and dancing roles are divided according to gender, age and spirit initiation status; performances are daily and aim simultaneously at entertainment and survival (Rouget 2004). Among the Mbendjele, musicking activities are all called *massana*. Here I explore this institution by first identifying the activities included in *massana* before focusing on forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*).

### The Mbendjele institution *massana*

*Massana* performances are part of what Finnegan called the ‘politics of joy’ (2013: 700) and are considered to have a certain degree of efficacy. Finnegan’s expression adequately reflects the idea that, according to the Mbendjele the main objective of *massana* performances is to bring joy to the camp and to “open it up”. In this Mbendjele expression, when the camp or village is opened, then food enters. People will easily find game, honey, wild yams, etc., without having to walk far in the forest. When the camp or village is “closed”, then people are hungry as they struggle to find food (Lewis 2002: 144). The animals get away from traps, the wild yams stay invisible and the honey is dry. *Massana* performances are thus supposed to help the camp or village to open up, and people measure the performance’s efficiency according to the ease with which they find food after the ritual has been performed.

The concept of *massana* brings together various kinds of activities which a priori do not seem to be related to each other. The term *massana* is used to describe religious practices -including forest spirits performances- as well as non-religious practices such as adult and children games. The table below presents Mbendjele sub-categories of *massana* activities according to their denomination in Mbendjee. The activities listed in table 1 are all called ‘*massana*’ but are also regrouped in dissociated and named sub-categories according to the type of performance.

<i>Mokondi massana</i>	<i>Massana</i>	<i>Massana ya baana</i>
Forest spirit performances	Adult games	Children’s games and forest spirits

**Table 1:** Mbendjele sub-categories of *massana* activities

Mbendjele's conception of music is similar to the conception of other Pygmy groups as described in the previous section. *Massana* performances can be considered as religious practices because they all aim at producing 'good' sounds, which 'open' the forest and ensure the community's well-being (Lewis 2006: 17). Although to avoid confusion it is important to note that many religious practices are not considered by the Mbendjele to be *massana*. As Lewis, pointed out, "Mbendjele consider [minor magical-medicinal acts] practical activities that are done privately in a mundane and discreet manner, whereas [community ceremonies] are, amongst other things, spectacular, joyful and exuberant communal activities" (Lewis 2002: 136). Even though the aim of these two different sets of practices (minor magical-medicinal acts and community ceremonies) might be identical (e.g. ensure success in hunting), they are not thought of, in Mbendjele's mind, as part of the same category as the table above illustrates.

One of the common features to all *massana* activities is the involvement of the whole community or at least a group of people, which makes them intrinsically collective. Some other non-*massana* magical-medicinal acts are done individually. For instance, a woman can gather some leaves and mushrooms in the forest and hide these under her husband's bed to prevent him from leaving her. Even though she can share her knowledge with her friends, performing the magical act itself does not require more than one individual and is not called *massana*.

### ***Massana*: ritual, play or performance?**

In this dissertation, I sometimes use the anthropological concept of 'ritual' to talk about forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) because of their affiliation to religious practice in Mbendjele's discourse. Bahuchet noted that "the Aka present an extreme example where religion is nearly exclusively expressed through music and dance, without officiant, without prayer and without offerings, that is without any perceptible religious gesture" (Bahuchet 1995: 59, translation from Fűrniiss 2014:194). Musicking is a religious act in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) because it has a direct effect on the forest and spirit's benevolence towards people.



The Mbendjele told me that they performed forest spirit rituals (*mokondi massana*) because “the forest likes it” (*ndima adinga*), and because it “brings joy to the world” (*massana akaba esengo o mokili*). Despite their apparent entertaining aspect, musicking performances often contain a religious component for the Aka (Kisliuk 1998, Fűriss 2006: 4) as well as for the Mbuti (Harako 1980; Turnbull 1965).

The anthropological concept of ‘ritual’ can be useful to distinguish what is thought from what is done, even if one cannot go without the other. As Shils puts it, “beliefs could exist without rituals; rituals, however, could not exist without beliefs” (Shils 1968: 736). Mbendjele’s *massana* rituals are a practical application of their religion, in which music and dance are privileged ways to communicate with supernatural beings such as forest spirits and the forest as a whole, like other Aka and Baka groups (Joiris & Fűriss 2010: 1).

Children’s *massana* or adult games are a field for the apprenticeship of cooperation mechanisms and the aesthetical aspects of *massana* rituals. In their games, children learn how to cooperate as a group and assimilate the technical aspects of forest spirit performances.

All *massana* activities, rituals (explicitly religious) and games (explicitly play), are creators of “good sounds” (laughter, beautiful singing and dancing) and ultimately participate in the well-being of the forest and therefore in the well-being of the community.

It follows that the Mbendjele do not distinguish ‘ritual’ from ‘play’ in their conception of *massana* performances (Lewis 2014: 235). “*Massana* activities are based on the principle that the better the participants coordinate with each other the more pleasure they experience” (*ibid.*), as pleasure and joy are central to the quality of a game as much as of a ritual. The anthropological concepts of ‘ritual’ and ‘play’ are therefore used in this thesis to think about *massana* performances, and to point at the religious aspect or the playfulness of an activity when talking about different sub-categories of *massana* performances.

In the next section, I examine Mbendjele’s cosmology in order to highlight the importance of the performance of forest spirit rituals (*mokondi massana*) in Mbendjele’s religious practice. Introducing the ground rules underlying forest spirit

performances (*mokondi massana*) allow me to better emphasize later on in this thesis the uniqueness of each forest spirit (*mokondi*) and forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*).

### **Forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*)**

The study and description of Pygmy's cosmologies and religious systems has been problematic to anthropologists. Building on Joiris (1996: 245) and Sawada (1998: 86), Lewis showed that "there is debate among researchers working on Pygmy people concerning the degree to which presentations of their cosmologies have been influenced by each researcher's preoccupations, and the misapplication of western religious terms such as 'God', 'ghosts' and 'spirits'" (Lewis 2002: 95). I acknowledge my bias since my descriptions of Mbendjele's religious system are based on my own observations in a relatively small area, and conditioned by my interest in music-related practices. I nevertheless work as much as possible within the frame of emic categories using Mbendjee words, in an attempt to avoid creating irrelevant distinctions.

In this section, I start by clarifying the distinction existing between 'good' and 'evil' spirits, to define the characteristics of spirits participating to forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). I then move on to highlight the high degree of regional diversity of spirit performances throughout the Pygmy area, before describing the ground rules underlying spirit-guardianship and initiations.

### **Mbendjele's cosmology: 'good' and 'evil' spirits**

Mbendjele believe that *Komba* created the forest and everything that is in it; plants, animals, people, and supernatural beings. "*Komba* is the creator and loves people who live properly. When people die they go to live in a forest (*poto*) with *Komba* to await reincarnation. During this period they may return to their living relatives in dreams to give them important advice and information, such as where to find game or a special leaf, or even to cure them from illness and misfortune (Lewis 2002: 96).

People who did not live properly transform into animals instead of joining *Komba* in his village (*poto*).

“The Mbendjele believe that people are reincarnated as forest animals for having been sorcerers or cannibals who killed people when they were humans or simply for having been a *Bilo*. The *Bilo* become gorillas after death. But *Bilo* sorcerers and cannibals become the small helpless mammals that everything hunts: duiker, monkey, hyrax, porcupine, etc. *Komba* (God) does this to annoy them, so they get killed and eaten many times over, as they did to others while they were sorcerers. After many lives (and deaths) as forest animals, the spirits of the sorcerer, cannibal or *Bilo* is eventually allowed to return to a new village (i.e. be reincarnated as a person)” (*ibid.*: 97).

In the forest, next to people and animals live forest spirits (*mokondi*). *Mokondi* spirits are wild, and can potentially harm people, even kill people. “*Mokondi* wander naked in the forest, they are often short, with large heads and bellies and have whitish, translucent skin” (*ibid.*: 142). Tsuru gave similar description of spirits (*me*) from the Baka of Cameroon. Baka spirit-guardians cover the spirits with clothes because the latter are too shy to appear naked in front of people (Tsuru 1998: 60). It is a dangerous act to capture a *mokondi* spirit<sup>16</sup>. Yet, once captured, it can help his spirit-controller- or spirit-guardian- (*konja ua mokondi*) “for good or evil purposes” (Lewis 2002: 142).

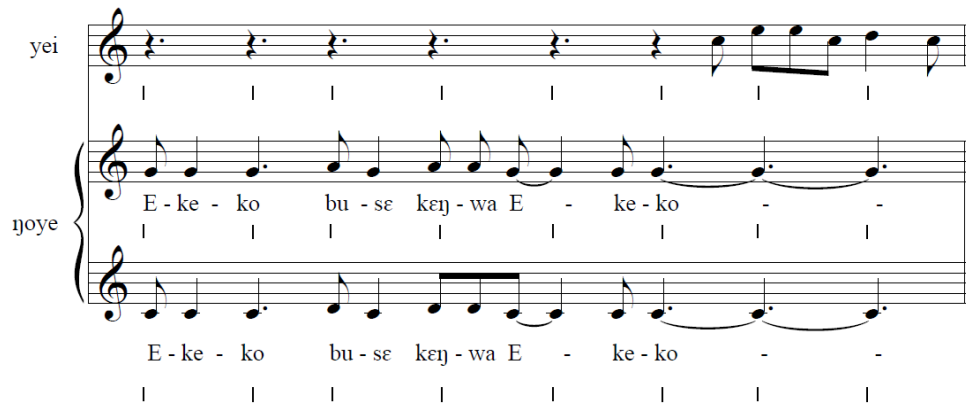
*Makuma* for instance, is a *mokondi* spirit who can help his guardian in the process of catching game with traps (see figure 5). *Makuma* has been recently found in the forest by Balé, an elder man from the village of Sendébumu. Balé told me that he found *Makuma* while visiting his traps in the forest, and that he managed to capture it, becoming his spirit-guardian (*konja mokondi*). According to Balé, *Makuma* is very shy, and does not come often in the village or in forest camps. It does not dance nor speak, and avoids being seen by villagers. When *Makuma* approaches the village, he stays on the edges of the forest though most of the times he does not dare to come that close. Balé explained to me that it is easier for him to obtain *Makuma*’s help when in the forest, and *Makuma* specifically helps him with his traps, indicating him where to place them and when to visit them, i.e. as soon as an animal has been caught<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> A description of the capture of a *mokondi* spirit by a child is given in a *gano* story in chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> See appendix 2 n°3.

Here is a transcription of the song that Balé learnt from *Makuma* and that he uses to call him out and get his help. Balé taught this song to a few women so that they could help him to get *Makuma*'s support. This spirit is called *Makuma*, and Balé's *Makuma mokondi* is named Ekeko. Balé uses his *Makuma mokondi*'s name in his song (see figure 4).



**Figure 4:** *Ekeko, buse kengwa Ekeko*: “Ekeko, we are looking for Ekeko” (*Makuma* repertoire)

Until now, Balé did not share *Makuma*'s guardianship with any other man, maybe because this spirit has only been discovered very recently. This example shows that the capture of *mokondi* spirits is made by individuals, and that each *mokondi* spirit has aesthetic characteristics of its own including his clothing, repertoire of songs, dance movements and performance setting.

“As a rule of thumb, negative or destructive *mokondi* feed on blood, sometimes from the kin of their evil human controller. Therefore good spirit-controllers only make pacts with positive *mokondi* that are ‘fed’ by singing and dancing. These two types of *mokondi* are often opposed to each other in everyday speech but in reality appear to represent more of a continuum from socially positive to socially negative, with *massana mokondi* grouped at the positive end and evil spirit-controllers’ *mokondi ua kiti* at the other” (Lewis 2002: 142).

Because of my focus on *massana* activities, I consider only ‘good’ *mokondi* spirits, which are fed with singing and dancing and are part of *mokondi massana* ritual economy. I exclude from my analysis the spirit-guardianship of ‘evil’ spirits, which belong to the domain of sorcery. I discussed the matter of evil spirits with Mbio, Nyemu’s younger brother, who is a renowned *ngānga* (traditional healer) throughout the Likouala region. People say that his eyes are strong (*miso na bude*) and that he is a good healer because he can see through people by looking into the fire (*a fedie*

*mendo ua bato ndenge atala munya*). Mbio told me that every night he stands guard against the attacks of evil spirits (*mokondi ua kiti*) and sorcerers (*gundu*). “If you look at me, you will think I am sleeping” he said, “but my spirit stands at the frontiers of Bonguinda’s territory, and I protect people with the help of other Baaka *bangānga* (traditional healers)”.

Evil spirits (*mokondi ua kiti*) wander in the forest and harm people whenever they get a chance. During casual conversations in Bonguinda, people often tell stories of people who had been ‘caught’ by evil spirits while going to the toilet or lying against a tree in the forest. Famous fights between *ngānga* and sorcerers are also often told by people. Once, I was on my way to Djoubé with Mongi and Eudia, two young men. As we approached a patch of tall grass Mongi and Eudia remembered a famous fight. They started to tell the story of a *ngānga* who had fought fiercely to repel a sorcerer trying to harm people in Bonguinda.

Contrary to evil spirits, “*mokondi* that ‘eat’ singing and dancing are all *mokondi* that help the community, not individuals. They obtain their food from a sustainable source and return their powers to the participants and enchant the forest” (Lewis 2002: 143). A spirit-guardian can sell his *mokondi* guardianship to others through initiation and in exchange of large amounts of cash and/or goods. A spirit-guardianship can be passed on by inheritance and can also be stolen (*ibid.*).

The theft of spirit guardianship is not frequent but common, and is taken very seriously by spirit-guardians. I once saw a man in Bonguinda get severely beaten for stealing someone else’s spirit-guardianship. Lewis gave accounts of the theft of spirit-guardianship in Ibamba among the Mbendjele of the Sangha, and showed that serious arguments and fights between communities emerge from such situations (Lewis 2015: 16-18). In everyday discussions, people often comment upon spirit thieves. In the light of the many stories of theft I heard in Bonguinda, I gathered that the archetypical case of spirit-guardianship theft is a man coming to a foreign village to visit family or participate in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), and who goes back to his village having stolen the ritual procedures and performs without having obtained permission from the original spirit-guardian. When the news of the crime arrives to the original spirit-guardian’s ears, conflicts arise that can lead to violence (*ibid.*).

Once 'good' spirits are captured or purchased, they can be called and lured out of the forest to participate in *massana* performances. I will now give key elements of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), emphasising the high degree of regional diversity existing throughout BaYaka's area.

### ***Mokondi massana* performances: high regional diversity**

Anyone can participate in playful *massana* activities, however forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) are complex, gendered and organized by a strict set of rules. There are a plethora of forest spirits in some Pygmy groups. Tsuru (1998) and Bundo (2001) gave remarkable descriptions of the variety of *be* spirit performances among the Baka of Cameroon which testify of the similarity of Aka's and Baka's system despite a high degree of variability of form and content (Lewis 2002: 141; 2015: 9).

Lewis (2002: 139) gave an extensive study of forest spirits among the Mbendjele of the Sangha region (RoC), while Fűrniiss recently emphasized the high diversity of spirit performances among Aka Pygmy groups (Fűrniiss 2014: 194). Using her own work in addition to Bahuchet's (1995: 61) and Kisliuk's (1998: 99) findings, she showed that songs and spirit performances circulate across areas, and travel through people who move to visit relatives or participate to large social gatherings. "As these movements partially reflect the dynamics of family links between lineages, the musical and choreographic heritage is never identical from one place to another, although the main repertoires and rhythms are the same" (Fűrniiss 2014: 194).

Among the Aka and Baka, each camp or clan is the guardian of specific spirits and their associated performances: "rules of participation, dancing and singing styles, songs, the clothes given to the *mokondi* may all vary, but the underlying structure remains remarkably stable despite this diversity of form and content throughout the Yaka area" (Lewis 2002: 141, See also Joiris 1996; Joiris & Fűrniiss 2010 and Tsuru 1998 for descriptions of similar rules among the Baka of Cameroon.).

This high regional diversity prevents me from giving a general account of all Mbendjele forest spirits. Instead, I will describe in this dissertation forest spirits called and danced by Mbendjele from the village of Bonguinda, as well as some forest spirit

performances (*mokondi massana*) I participated in in Sendébumu, Bobanda, Indongo and Bangui-Motaba. The list presented here is therefore not exhaustive, and may neglect to show spirits which did not perform during my stay.

The configuration of forest spirits that was visible in Bonguinda is different from the account Lewis gave on Mbendjele of the Sangha region (Lewis 2002: 139). Some forest spirits are nonetheless widely spread and can be found in very distant locations. *Edjengi* seems to be the most widely spread forest spirit within Pygmy communities, as it is found in the Sangha and Likouala regions of the RoC (Lewis 2002; Rouget 2004), as well as among the Baka of Cameroon (Bundo 2001; Joiris 1996; Fűrmiss 2014; Tsuru 1998), the Aka of the CAR (Kisliuk 1998) and possibly the Bakwa of North-west DRC (Kévin Sasia, personal communication, 2015). *Dgoku* and *Yeli* are also wide spread spirits (Lewis 2015: 9). Others, like *Makuma*, have been recently found and have not spread yet.

Some forest spirits are directed towards the creation of laughter and beautiful singing, while others have more specific and explicit roles such as the success in net hunting, elephant hunting or the lifting of mourning. In the table 2, the spirits appear according to the frequency of performances in Bonguinda during fieldwork (April 2013-July 2014).

Frequency	Type of forest spirit	Gender or age group claiming guardianship	Circumstance of performance
Performances regularly held	<i>Edjengi</i>	Men	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> ) Lifting of mourning ceremony ( <i>Matānga</i> ) Funeral commemoration ( <i>Matānga</i> )
	<i>Libongu</i>		Communication between genders
	<i>Bolobe</i>	Men	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> ) Elephant hunting ( <i>Muaka</i> ) Lifting of mourning ceremony ( <i>Matānga</i> ) Funeral commemoration ( <i>Matānga</i> )
	<i>Dgoku</i>	Women	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> ) Communication between genders Lifting of mourning ceremony ( <i>Matānga</i> ) Funeral commemoration ( <i>Matānga</i> )
	<i>Ekāmbaleki</i>	Men	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> ) Net hunting ( <i>Bokia</i> )
	<i>Mopepe</i>	Children	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
	<i>Bolu</i>		
	<i>Esule</i>		
	<i>Diānga</i>	Women	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
	<i>Djoboko</i>	Men	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
	<i>Dāmba</i>	Men	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
Performances occasionally held	<i>Makbo</i>		Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
	<i>Kpamba</i>		Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
	<i>Makuma</i>		Hunting with traps
	<i>So</i>		Joy ( <i>esengi</i> ) Communication between genders
	<i>Mobema</i>	The community as a whole	To purify the community and cleanse <i>ekila</i>
Performances the author heard of or saw out of context	<i>Yeli</i>	Women	Elephant hunting ( <i>Muaka</i> )
	<i>Kose</i>	Women	To establish a new camp ( <i>Lāngo a kwi</i> )
	<i>Diasa</i>	Women	For the birth of twins ( <i>Diasa</i> )
	<i>Molimu</i>	Women	Joy ( <i>esengi</i> )
	<i>Mafudia</i>	Men	Unknown
	<i>Eki</i>		
	<i>Eniope</i>		
	<i>Ndele</i>		
	<i>Edio</i>		
	<i>Samali</i>		

**Table 2:** Mokondi spirits in Bongiunda and Bobanda (2013-2014)



Forest spirits can be privileged associates for people in order for them to be successful in their lives. Good forest spirits (*mokondi*), when properly fed with singing and dancing, can

“assist in the food quest, protect their initiates from harm and danger, transform negative emotion and tension in the camp into laughter and co-operation, disharmony into coordination, cleanse bad luck, protect from sorcery, bring people together in extraordinary harmony, sometimes creating ecstatic trance states, and empower men, or women, or the whole community of men, women and children” (Lewis 2002: 144).

The Mbuti share similar conceptions as forest spirits (*molimo*) are considered to have only two tasks: “eating and singing, singing and eating” (Turnbull 1963: 70) while, according to Joiris & Fűrmiss Baka say spirits communicate with people through musicking (Joiris & Fűrmiss 2010: 1).

Each *mokondi* has a name, and specific characteristics that distinguishes it from other *mokondi* (Lewis 2015: 11). Performances of the same spirit (e.g. *Dgoku*) can be very different from one another, depending on which *mokondi* is dancing. In Bonguinda, in contrast to the Sangha Region, a single man or woman can be the guardian of several *Dgoku mokondi* or *Bolobe mokondi*. Men and women’s spirits have personalities and individual ways of performing that can vary a lot from one another.

### **Forest spirits and Mbendjele personhood**

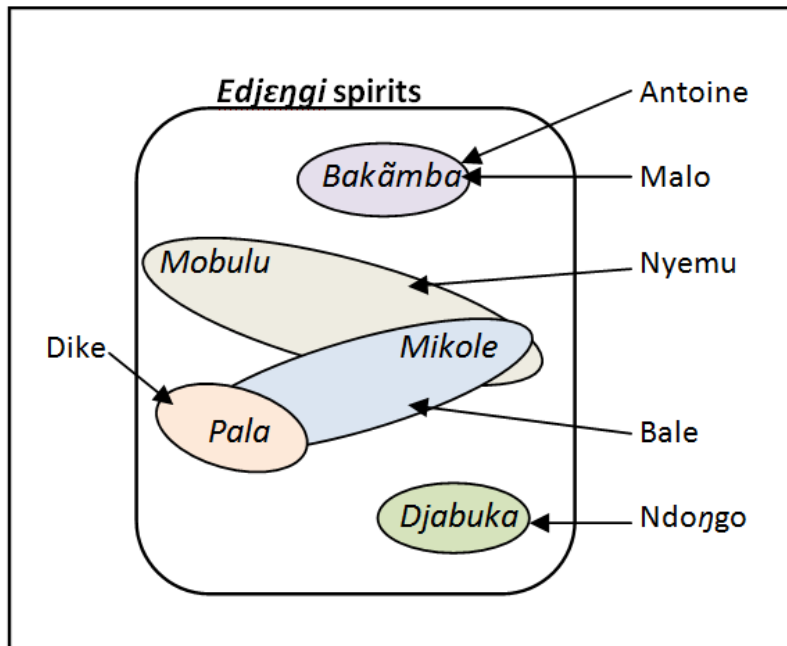
Mbendjele sense of identity is based on several elements and forest life is a strong identity marker which differentiates the Mbendjele from their *Bilo* neighbours. That some Mbendjele speak the same or similar languages as the *Bilo* does not seem to alter their identity as BaYaka since the perception of Mbendjele identity is rather based on an aesthetic quality and lifestyle (Lewis 2002: 54-55; 68). While language is marginal to their sense of identity, the nomadic hunter-gatherer life style highly defines the way the Mbendjele think themselves. The special relationship the BaYaka entertain with the forest and the expert knowledge they have of their environment is recognized -both by the *Bilo* and by the Mbendjele themselves- as being characteristic of BaYaka culture and lifestyle (Lewis 2002: 265).

Lewis also notes that the Mbendjele “recognise and highly value social harmony, pleasure and laughter” (ibid.). The value accorded to social harmony has to be grounded in action to be recognized as such. Social harmony in the Yaka sense

should be acquired through egalitarian behaviours combined with the expert performance of forest-spirit rituals. Lewis showed that “expertly performing these rituals and their accompanying musical styles implies that those able to do so have characteristic cultural orientations central to BaYaka personhood and identity” (*in press.*). This can be seen in the way the Mbendjele identify other Pygmy groups as ‘BaYaka’ when hearing them sing or perform forest spirit rituals. The aesthetics of *massana* activities lie at the basis of Mbendjele culture and are recognized as an important identity marker.

Further, the initiation to forest spirits as a learning process and the status of initiate itself participate to the construction of men and women’s personhood. The action of performing these rituals necessitates the expertise of a certain aesthetic, a specific way of transmitting and sharing knowledge, a causal relation between the performance and the success of the food quest as well as social and cosmological ramifications that “serve to reproduce key cultural orientations [the Mbendjele] consider central to BaYaka personhood and cultural identity” (Lewis 2011: 15). The two most powerful and widespread spirits *Edjengi* and *Dgoku* are central to men’s and women’s identity as some of the characteristics attributed to forest spirits are to be found in Mbendjele men and women. “The fear *Edjengi* creates is also part of male identity. Men should be feared since they are potentially deadly” (Lewis 2002: 187). The way the Mbendjele interact with their social and natural environment is structured by the nature of their interactions with the forest and with forest spirits.

Fortes has noted that personhood can be attributed to supernatural beings (1973: 582), which is the case in the Mbendjele context concerning forest spirits. Additionally to general characteristics associated to each class of spirit, each individual spirit is attributed specific personality traits, which are associated to the spirit guardians’ own individual personhood. It follows that the relationship men and women initiate with their respective forest spirits participates to the elaboration and expression of their identity (Lewis 2002: 189).



**Figure 60:** Individual guardianship of forest spirits

In addition to being initiated to one's clan's *Edjengi* spirit, men are also encouraged to be initiated to *Edjengi* spirits of *etuka* men i.e. men from other Mbendjele clans. Figure 60 gives an example of how the identity of the spirits owned participates to the construction of the initiate's identity. Nyemu and Bale are from the same clan, and are both initiated to Mikole, their clan's *Edjengi* spirit. They also both got initiated to a second *Edjengi* spirit, this time from *etuka* men; Nyemu got initiated to Mobulu and Bale to Pala. Despite the fact that they are both from the same clan, they have an individual way to relate to their *Edjengi* spirits as they are not the same and therefore have different personality traits and attributes. Others (like Malo or Dike in this example) are 'only' initiated to their clan's *Edjengi* spirit, which also says something about their individual identity.

The interactions between humans and forest spirits are also grounded in Mbendjele's capacity to communicate with supernatural beings. Mbendjele identity is therefore also predicated on individuals' mystical power, and on the strength of their *gundu*, the seat of mystical powers. Lewis defines *gundu* as the "ambivalent substance that resides in the stomach or intestines of an individual and [which] is the source of mystical abilities and hereditary powers" (Lewis 2002: 31). *Gundu* is the seat of sorcery, and a mystical force which intervenes in people's interactions with forest spirits. Mbendjele women for instance use their *gundu* to tie up the spirits of game during women's forest spirit rituals (Lewis 2002: 108). The process of

interacting with forest spirits, including the calling of spirits during performances is considered by the Mbendjele to be a strong cultural marker. Pollock noted that “masks are not merely pictures of other beings, but are more fundamentally considered to be ways in which the identity of those beings is attributed to or predicated of the mask-wearer as well” (1995: 583). One of the most salient interaction with forest spirits concerns the process of calling the spirit, and the action of transforming or concealing humans’ identity into forest spirits’ ones.

Following Pollock’s approach (1995), I consider masking as a technique of identity display and transformation, and the dialectics of the elaboration and manufacture of forest spirits’ clothing will be described in detail in chapter 4. For now, let us consider the way the Mbendjele construct their identity around their expert ability to perform forest spirit rituals, and more specifically through their ability to call the spirits and signal their presence since aesthetics are central in the display of identity transformation during forest spirit rituals.

Scholars working on Pygmies’ musicking practices have been using various terms to describe the performance itself, the manifestations of forest spirits or the human performers, in a way that reflects the variety of interpretations existing and compels me to clarify the terms I use in this thesis to avoid any confusion. I explained earlier that I use the term ‘performance’ to describe any musical and/or choreographical collective activity corresponding to Mbendjele’s category ‘*massana*’. Through the use of this term, I hope to avoid creating subjective dichotomies with arbitrary distinctions.

To describe performances associated to forest spirits, I use, after Lewis (2002), the Mbendjele term ‘*mokondi massana*’ which literally means ‘forest spirit performance’. Rouget used expressions such as ‘action choréographo-musicale’ and ‘représentation théâtrale entièrement faite de chants et de danses’ to talk about men’s spirit performances like *Edjengi*, while women spirit performances like *Yeli* are called ‘chant magique’ or ‘pièce chorale’ (Rouget 2004 : 30-31). This plethora of terms can be confusing as the same activity from an emic perspective (forest spirit performance) is given many names by outsiders unaware of the emic categories. Scholars sometimes accentuate the musical aspect (‘musicking’, Rouget 2004) or the choreographic movements (‘danse’, Joiris 1996), sometimes the religious

intensity ('dramatic play', Bundo 2001; 'chant magique', Rouget 2004), or the playfulness ('spirit-play', Lewis 2002). To limit myself to the holistic term 'performance' prevents me from emphasizing one aspect at the expense of others.

To describe the relationship between initiates and forest spirits, I use the emic notion of 'guardianship' (*konja ua mokondi*) which seems to have created a consensus among scholars working on different Pygmy groups (e.g. Lewis 2002; Tsuru 1998). Initiates are thus called 'spirit-guardians', and the 'spirit-guardianship' refers to the relation between a spirit (*mokondi*) and its guardian (*konja*). Because of the wide use of the term, I call the communities of initiates gathered around the guardianship of a spirit 'ritual associations' (Joiris 1996; Joiris & Fűrnis 2010; Lewis 2002; Tsuru 1998).

To describe the visible or audible manifestation of a spirit during a performance, approaches also diverge according to scholars. Rouget described the *Edjengi* spirit among the BaNgombe of the Sangha region as 'un personnage masqué disparaissant entièrement sous un costume'<sup>18</sup> (Rouget 2004: 29). Similarly, talking about *be* spirit performances among the Baka of Cameroon Bundo wrote that a 'dancer puts on one of the special costumes' and dances 'with' a spirit (Bundo 2001: 88). The Mbendjele consider forest spirits to be *persons* in Harris's sense, i.e. in the sense that only agents of meaningful action are considered as persons (Harris 1989: 602). The forest spirit's actions during rituals have concrete and visible consequences on people's lives as they have an impact on the food quest. It is thus important in the context of forest spirit rituals (*mokondi massana*) to consider the duality of the human performer's and forest spirit's display of identity. Rappaport stated that "those who act in drama are, as we say, 'only acting' which is precisely to say that they are not actually taking action but only mimicking action... Ritual, in contrast, is 'in earnest', that is, it is understood by performers to be taking place in the word." (1999: 42). Mbendjele do not consider the spirits performing as people *mimicking* spirits. At the moment of the performance, the performing forest spirits are not considered as humans or humans *pretending* to be spirits. For the time of the performance, the performers are not themselves anymore, but are forest spirits. At best, we could consider, as Schechner puts it, that during a forest spirit performance,

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<sup>18</sup> This could be translated as 'a masked figure entirely disappearing under a costume'.

“the dancer is ‘not himself’ and yet ‘not not himself’” but somewhere in between. (Schechner 1983: 10). Even in the cases in which the mask fails to conceal the identity of the wearer i.e. when the performer can be recognized despite the spirit’s clothing, other elements such as the voice or a specific set of body and dance movements signal the “disguise of identity” of the wearer (Pollock 1995: 584).

After Lewis, I thus consider the spirit from an Mbendjele point of view, and therefore consider that, for the time of the performance, the identity of the human performer is concealed while the identity of the forest spirit is displayed. I therefore use the Mbendjele term ‘*mokondi*’ to refer to individual spirits during performances. As I will develop shortly, each ‘class’ of forest spirits (e.g. *Edjengi*, *Dgoku*, *Bolobe*) contains several named individual spirits (Lewis 2015: 11). When I use the term *Dgoku mokondi* or *Bolobe mokondi*, I refer to an individual spirit owned by an individual or a clan.

### **Spirit-guardianship**

Spirit guardianships are among the only things in Mbendjele society that cannot be shared freely and that have to be purchased with money and goods (Lewis 2002: 215). Lewis revealed how Mbendjele consider that “certain products of our own deductions, inspirations, dreams, and discoveries can belong to us. They only exist because someone thought or dreamed them into being” (Lewis 2014: 228). When one purchases a *mokondi* spirit, one purchases the right to have a special relationship with the *mokondi*, that is governed by certain key elements: providing the *mokondi* with specific clothing, voice, type of dance movements, songs and set pieces of the performance. The purchase of new *mokondi* is very much encouraged by elders. At several occasions, I heard elders urge young men to travel to other Mbendjele communities in order to find and bring back new forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) –and therefore more joy- to Bonguinda (e.g. *dwa bɔse bolobe āŋga bato o Pokola!* i.e. “Go get *Bolobe* spirits from people in Pokola!”).

Any initiated man is allowed to listen to the songs, or assist to a spirit performance although men sometimes have to pay a small fine when they assist to a spirit performance in a foreign Mbendjele village, even if they are initiated to the class of spirit performing. Visitors might have to pay the right to see a particular *mokondi*

spirit, yet the fine is a symbolic amount (100 to 200 Fr CFA) This might be a specificity of Bonguinda area, as this rule is not followed in other Mbendjele areas (Lewis, pers. com.).

In September 2013 I assisted in a *Bolobe* performance in Bonguinda, accompanied by Paul. Paul is a twenty-six-years-old Mbendjele living in Pokola and working as a presenter at the local radio *biso na biso* (Lingala expression meaning 'together'), He speaks French and stayed with me in Bonguinda for a month to help me learn Mbendjee. When a *Bolobe* performance started, Paul was asked to pay a fine as, although he was initiated to *Bolobe*, he was not initiated to this particular *Bolobe mokondi*. Paul was astonished as he never encountered a similar situation in other Mbendjele villages. Men insisted that their *Bolobe mokondi* could not be seen freely by strangers.

They offered Paul two options: pay 100 Fr CFA or stay away from the village for the time of the performance. Paul agreed to pay the fine and the performance went on. As women were doing *edyāṅguma*, a dance movement very popular in Bonguinda, getting very close to the *Bolobe* spirits, Paul was very surprised. "If women had danced that close to *Bolobe* spirits in Pokola, they would have been severely beaten by men! This is astonishing!"

Paul's reaction to Bonguinda inhabitants' rules and ways of performing demonstrates the regional variations existing within the Mbendjele area. The *Bolobe* spirit performances' musical, visual and performative elements can differ in such a way that an initiation is not valid throughout Mbendjele's area. I have never witnessed men from Bonguinda ask a fine to Mbendjele men coming from the neighbouring villages of Sendébumu, Bobanda or Bangui-Motaba. Many Bonguinda inhabitants have relatives and often marry women in these villages.

For *Bolobe* like for other wide-spread classes of spirits such as *Edjengi* or *Dgɔku*, each *mokondi* has its own name and unique characteristics, and each clan is associated to a specific *mokondi* (Lewis 2002: 139). The spirit-guardian, *konja ua mokondi*, is "the eldest clan member of the appropriate gender who is still physically and mentally capable" (*ibid.*). Lewis showed that the position of spirit-guardian does not give any authority beyond the context of spirit performances. The status of *konja ua mokondi* rather puts responsibilities on individuals, who are responsible of the

performance's organisation and unfolding, as "the initiates in the ritual association will constrain the *konja* with mockery and outright rebuttal should she or he become unreasonable" (*ibid.*: 140).

## Initiation procedures

Each *mokondi* requires specific initiation procedures according to the type of spirit it is. "All *bangonja* [initiated] had first to be *mboni* (neophytes) and get initiated (Lewis 2002: 148). Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to assist in spirit initiations apart from my own. I encountered difficulties in getting information on initiations, as in Mbendjele society, asking questions is very rude, especially when it concerns secret knowledge and activities. I thus did not manage to get much information about initiations during informal interviews, as I was lacking concrete examples to open the discussion. I thus infer the proceedings of initiations according to my own experiences -as I've been initiated to different *mokondi*, namely *Dgɔku* and *Yele*, a women's spirit associated to elephant hunting. I hope that my insights on women's proceedings will complete Lewis' work on men spirit initiations, in an attempt to pull out proceedings common to both men and women.

When Nyemu and Ai decided that it was time for me to get initiated after seven months spent with them, everyone agreed that "my" father's mother, Mungwo, should supervise my initiation as she was the clan's elder spirit-guardian (*konja ua mokondi*) for *Dgɔku*. After a few more months, Ai decided that I should be initiated to her own *Dgɔku mokondi* too. Ai is from Bangui-Motaba, and came to Bonguinda when she married Nyemu.

One day, we went for a gathering trip in the forest, just the three of us, Ai, Nyemu and I. Ai and I were looking for wild yams while Nyemu was looking for bees hives that his nephew could come to visit later. He was also looking at the traps he had set on porcupines' tracks. We stopped to rest after a while, and they started to talk about one of the *mokondi* spirit Ai owned. She explained that the people from Bangui-Motaba were the first to have discovered *Dgɔku*, and that hence her *Dgɔku mokondi* was more powerful than the one owned by women in Bonguinda. She wanted to make sure that I would be safe, and that a strong spirit would keep an eye on me in



the forest. (*Il faut* [French] *mokondi na bude abatela afe, tãmbi bona?* i.e. “A strong spirit must keep you safe, not so?”). They also told me that Nyemu’s *Edjengi* was very strong and that when my partner would come, they would have him initiated to Nyemu’s *Edjengi*.

Ai told me that she wanted to do my initiation in Bonguinda so that many girls would be here to make a great *Dgoku* performance. A few weeks later, we came back to the village of Bonguinda after a couple of months spent in a forest camp. That’s when Ai initiated me to her *Dgoku mokondi*<sup>19</sup>. Months later, Ai narrated to her girl friends in Sendébumu the way my *Dgoku mokondi*, Makuba, came to me and looked me right in the eyes in the forest:

<i>Camille amundifè liDgoku ānga sunu.</i>	Camille has found our <i>Dgoku</i>
<i>Makuba a musukana teeeee ka mboli, ta!</i>	Makuba came closer until it was really close!
<i>Asombanè.</i>	She paid.
<i>Bon</i> [French], <i>bato bese va ba nta tè te.</i>	Now, not everyone here saw the spirit.
<i>LiDgoku ānga Camillie, adie elo</i>	Today, Camille’s <i>Dgoku</i> is/exists.

In total, I’ve been initiated to three different *Dgoku mokondi*, and each time I had to pay 2000Fr CFA, as well as sustain the women who participated in my initiations with salt and cigarettes. All the goods and cash I paid for my initiations have been equally shared between all the participants, including the money. As the family I’ve been living with offered to initiate me without my asking, I consider that the processes of my initiation has been done in a proper Mbendjele way.

I have been initiated to Mungwo’s and Ai’s *Dgoku mokondi* on their demands, but I asked to be initiated to Modiembe’s *Dgoku mokondi* because I had been very impressed by the power of her spirit’s performance<sup>20</sup>.

Women, just like men, are initiated by their clan’s elders who are *konja ua mokondi* (Mungwo and Ai in my case). Lewis’s descriptions of how elders decide when to initiate a boy echoes women’s decision-making processes: “Elders observe small boys and comment to each other when they think someone is ready. They may even ask the boy if he thinks he is ready to ‘enter’ (bogie) *Ejengi*” (Lewis 2002: 180). According to Lewis, the neophytes’ elder male relatives are in charge of sponsorship

<sup>19</sup> Ai’s and Mungwo’s *Dgoku mokondi* are described in chapter 5.

<sup>20</sup> I describe the performance of Modiembe’s *Dgoku mokondi* in chapter 5.

and provide for his initiation: “The neophyte’s sponsor will be obliged to provide distilled corn or manioc spirit (*ngolongolo*- traded or bought from *Bilo*), palm wine, tobacco and foodstuffs such as honey, meat, yams or manioc in sufficient quantities for the feasting of the initiated men” (*ibid.*). For women spirits initiations, as a payment the neophyte has to offer cigarettes, marijuana and sometimes alcohol to the spirit-guardian, as well as some money (around 2000Fr CFA), and women can also be asked to give stingless bees honey (*koma*) and yams. Everything that is given by the neophyte is, as in the men’s context, equally shared with all the initiates who participated in the initiation.

Both men and women initiations includes a public part, a sacred and hidden part, followed by a second public part, during which the newly initiated person shows that he/she ‘has seen’ (*bo.te*) the *mokondi*. Lewis showed that “the *bangonja* [initiates] are crucial to any *mokondi massana* since they make all the necessary preparations for the realisation of the *massana*. Young initiates are expected to do the bulk of the hard physical work in preparing for a *massana*, while the elders supervise them and intervene at critical stages” (Lewis 2002: 148). I could observe a similar division of tasks during my initiations to *Dgɔku*.

Mbendjele say that someone ‘has seen the spirit’ (*mutedi mokondi*) to say that they are initiated. The day of my initiation to Ai’s *Dgɔku mokondi* in Bonguinda, she woke me up early in the morning by saying: “Camille, wake up! You are seeing *Dgɔku* today!” (*Camille vāngwa! Afe ta Dgoku elo!*). Similarly, at the occasion of a visit to Ikelemba in 2014 -after I had been initiated to *Dgɔku*- women were about to perform when Kombea, an elder woman, turned to me and said: “Go away! You haven’t seen *Dgɔku* yet!” (*Bānga! Afe nta botedi Dgoku te!*). I explained that I had been initiated already and Kombea accepted my participation, but she asked me to let her ‘hear’ my *Dgɔku mokondi* (*beke me kiŋgɔ a mokondi ame ɔkɛ*. i.e. “Give me your *mokondi*’s voice so that I can hear it.”). I made my *Dgɔku mokondi*’s voice heard, and women listened carefully before showing me they were satisfied by continuing the song. We all discussed my technical performative skills during our performance, and women made fun of my ‘small voice’ (*kiŋgɔ musoni ta!* i.e. “She has a small voice/throat, hasn’t she!”).

Women's use of the metaphor of sight to talk about people's relation to spirits echoes men's as, according to Lewis, "*Ejengi* initiation ... gives the neophytes *diso ua Ejengi* (*Ejengi's* eyes) that help initiated men to see trails and animals in the forest, and give them the ability to avoid large charging animals like buffalo or elephant" (Lewis 2002: 148).

### Concluding remarks

A review of selected publications showed that in immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies, sharing is a core feature of the egalitarian system (Woodburn 1980), and the Mbendjele communities also demonstrate a moral imperative to share (Lewis 2008; 2014). This first chapter introduced the idea that Mbendjele's relationships with human beings and with their environment are fundamentally based on a "cosmic economy of sharing" (Bird-David 1992). The Mbendjele say that the level of "good sounds" they produce has a visible impact on their ability to find food in the forest. Non-material products such as music or emotions are thus central in the sharing relations the Mbendjele maintain with their environment. Various ethnographic examples illustrated that non-material social products also play a role in the sharing of food and other material products such as musical instruments. Demand-sharing has been observed and described in several hunter-gatherer societies (Peterson 1993). The analysis demonstrated that in Mbendjele communities, two other types of sharing (forced-sharing and affective-sharing) compensate the inadequacy of demand-sharing in some situations and enable the fair sharing of goods within the community.

The Mbendjele privileged way to produce "good sounds" and to maintain the flow of sharing with humans and with the environment is by participating in *massana* activities. *Massana* has been defined in this chapter as a set of activities based on collective cooperation aiming at the production of beauty, and ensuring the well-being of the community by pleasing the forest. Forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) are a sub-category of *massana*, and constitute a main focus in this thesis.

The last sections of this chapter described how good *mokondi* spirit (as opposed to evil spirits) are captured by humans, and how forest spirit guardianships are purchased.

The next chapter will present some of the ways the Mbendjele use to transmit cultural knowledge to children about the value of playfulness, laughter and cooperation. The processes of cultural transmission and the analysis of children's games will demonstrate how children learn to become Mbendjele men and women who constantly feel the need of sharing their own selves.



**Figure 5:** *Makuma* spirit comes closer to the village, attracted by his song (Bonguinda, April 2014)

## Chapter 2:

# The egalitarian player

### The embodiment of egalitarianism

#### Introduction

This chapter looks at culture from the perspective of cultural transmission, the “process of social reproduction in which the culture's technological knowledge, behaviour patterns, cosmological beliefs, etc. are communicated and acquired” (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986: 922). It has been argued that what is “traditionally learned and internalized in infancy and early childhood tends to be most resistant to change in contact situations” (Bruner 1956: 194). What is transmitted into childhood could thus be considered to be the core features of a culture, which indelibly shape individuals for the rest of their lives.

This chapter demonstrates the importance of sharing as a defining cultural practice by first looking at some key ways that sharing values are acquired, before identifying the various ways in which children learn to express valued emotional dispositions and to share them within the community both verbally and non-verbally. I start by showing that in games and traditional story-telling, children learn cultural knowledge through play, during which key egalitarian values and rules of behaviour are embodied. I then focus on the immaterial nature of what is transmitted and shared by performers. The ethnography will present how Mbendjele discuss and

value emotions at a collective level, and explore why they so explicitly value music and dance as a vital way of managing the emotionally charged and collective bodily experience of the camp as a whole. Where *ekila* is concerned with managing the emotional and physical relationships within the nuclear family and between a married couple, *massana* is concerned with managing the emotional and physical well-being of a camp as a whole, and the key human groups within the camp- children, men and women.

### **Processes of cultural transmission**

Pygmies' mechanisms of cultural transmission have been studied by several authors (e.g. Boyette 2013, Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986, Kamei 2005, Morelli 1987, Neuwelt-Trunzer 1981, Rogoff & al. 2010). *Massana* activities performed exclusively by children provide a window onto some early processes by which children learn about the Mbendjele's egalitarian ideology, and suggest reasons for its surprising resilience.

Children's *massana* activities provide a context for children to learn about egalitarian values from an early age. The chapter proceeds to show how this continues into adulthood as adult *massana* activities build on the skills acquired in children's *massana*.

### **How children learn the 'need' of *massana* and other key survival skills**

Most Mbendjele children spend a large part of their day playing in independent child-only groups (Lewis 2002: 128). Each child is free to decide with whom they play and what they do. Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza showed that, among the Aka of the CAR, "children seldom contribute economically to the family or band" (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986: 930), as they are not explicitly expected to contribute to the survival of the family. Nevertheless, "Aka 10-year-olds have the skills to make a living in the forest" (*ibid*). A study recently showed that among the Baka of Cameroon, children frequently engage in subsistence activities during parental absence, substantially contributing to their nutritional intake (Gallois & al 2015: 10). My observations on the Mbendjele of the Motaba River show similar patterns as children engage in hunting,

gathering and fishing activities independently from adults and consume substantial amounts of food.

Children's regular practice of games helps them to learn and perfect forest skills in a safe environment. Children often imitate their parents and learn while playing. Girls build leaf huts (*ekuta*) in small sizes, and arrange them in a semi-circle, just like their parents when they settle in a new forest camp. They look after babies and toddlers, singing them songs and carrying them around. They go fishing in small ponds before lighting a small fire and cooking their catch of the day.

In everyday life, mothers often complain to their children: "You eat all day with your friends in the forest, and then you come crying to me for food!" (*bune na bakāŋgai bune dia na ndima bodi afe vea lela namu!*) Such sarcastic comments are common but often ignored by children, as parents also often encourage their children to play *massana*.

Small children, from the age they can walk to around four-years-old are already expected to contribute to the community's well-being, not by delivering food but by filling the camp or village with laughter and sharing positive emotions within the community.

I heard in many occasions parents specifically ask their children to play *massana*, giving them suggestions of games when children did not know what to do. In forest camps as well as in villages, Mbendjele adults encourage toddlers to dance whenever they feel like it. One quiet afternoon in a fishing camp (Makana, December 2013), Monoi took his musical bow (*game*) and started to play, simply to entertain the camp. His eighteen-months-old daughter Ɛmbe started to move her arms around, and her mother immediately started to clap her hands to encourage Ɛmbe to continue dancing, rapidly followed by other adults present in the camp at that time (see plate 1). No specific movements were demanded of Ɛmbe. As long as she moved, her parents and other adults congratulated her on her dancing, despite her clumsiness. The camp was enjoying Ɛmbe's dancing, and it brought laughter and nice music to the forest. Children are not pressured to contribute economically to the community, but are encouraged to contribute by sharing positive emotions, humouring adults with their antics, mostly through music and dance activities. Before



they can speak, children often already learnt to sing and dance through the practice of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) and musical games.

In addition, children often accompany their parents in the forest, and learn most of their forest skills with them. Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza claim that

“[Parent’s] overall contribution [to children’s knowledge] is 80.7% and the level of contribution ranges from 89.3% in food-acquisition skills to 51.9% for dancing and singing skills. ‘Watching others’ follows in importance but its significance is limited to the trait clusters of other hunt, special skills, and dancing/singing” (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986: 929).

To obtain such precise figures, Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza used a sample of 72 Aka individuals (40 adults and 36 teenagers and children) from Bagandou (CAR). They selected fifty skills in the domains of hunting, collecting, maintenance, child care, and village-orientated subsistence, e.g. make poison for crossbow arrows or collect water from forest liana. Each individual “was asked about each skill, if he or she possessed it, and, if so, if there were any particular person(s) or group (friends or adults, for example) who had shown them how to perform the skill” (*ibid.*: 928). To ensure the reliability of individuals’ responses, the authors checked and confirmed when possible with the individual’s parents and relatives. The figures obtained about parent-infant interactions were confirmed by direct systematic observation. Because the sample used is very small (72 individuals) and because the results were derived from interviews rather than direct observations, the authors’ results are not to be considered as definite or applicable to other Pygmy populations. I nevertheless interpret the authors’ figures as general tendencies, because their results coincide with what I have observed among the Mbendjele. I did not use any quantitative data myself, and therefore find very useful Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza’s study which offers interesting precisions on the way skills are transmitted.

These findings suggest that the transmission of Pygmy culture is distributed among the community between parents and non-parents, and emphasise the importance of the role of parents in the transmission of hunting and gathering skills.

As a matter of fact, it is mostly parents who teach children the technical skills they need to know for their individual survival, while other members of the community teach more than half of what children need to know to ensure the community’s survival. This chapter focuses on the ways children learn the prized cultural values of

cooperation and sharing of non-material social products through the practice of *massana* activities. The ethnography will show how Mbendjele associate cooperation and the sharing of positive emotions to the healthy functioning of the social group as a whole, and how adults teach the children the skills and techniques needed to cooperate and share efficiently. Activities which have to do with creating and sharing positive emotions and beauty are taught in a large part by the community as a whole. As Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza pointed out,

“dances are frequently learned by watching others and take place in a setting unlike many others. While most hunting, gathering, and maintenance activities take place in and around the nuclear family, dancing takes place where other members of the band are as available as one's parents ” (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986: 929).

Much joy is created during spirit performances, and children participate in them from an early age. Children are present and participate during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) before being initiated, and learn the singing and dancing skills along with the rules structuring the performance. In addition, children have their own *mokondi massana*, which help them to improve their skills in performative situations very similar to adult's *mokondi massana* performances.

### **Learning to perform adult *mokondi massana***

To ensure the community's survival, children have to learn the singing and dancing skills needed to perform adult *mokondi massana* which is, according to Mbendjele of Bonguinda, the most efficient way to please the forest and ensure food abundance. In order to do so, children's *mokondi massana* performances are regularly encouraged by adults in Bonguinda. *Mopepe* is a *mokondi* spirit which is very much enjoyed by children (see figure 6). During *Mopepe*, girls are requested to group together by adults and encouraged to sing. Boys are advised to go to their secret path (*njānga*) in the forest to call their spirits. Then girls start singing and boys bring their spirits into the camp to dance.

During children games, adults participate and advise children on how to proceed, even though the performance is mostly done by children. Women inspire girls with ideas for songs, and will often start a new song so that girls have the right tempo and

sing nicely while making the song last long enough to reach a pleasing climax. Boys also are sometimes told when to come forward and when to take their spirits back to the forest. When boys are making their spirits dance and/or girls are singing, adults often shout encouragements to them: “dance with more energy!” (*bina na lingisi* [lingala]!) when boys seem to be getting tired or “sing now!” (*emba ke!*) when girls would let a song die down or end without finishing it properly.

During casual discussions, parents often told me that seeing their children perform *mokondi massana* was a great pleasure and made them feel happy. Here is what Ai (forty-years-old woman) told me after one of her children’s performance (forest camp Mokakwa, May 2013):

<i>Boye baana āngamu bapia massana,</i>	When my children do spirit performances,
<i>bakaba buse bese esengo .</i>	They give us all so much joy.
<i>Ndima adiŋge.</i>	The forest loves it,
<i>amε diŋga.</i>	I love it.
<i>Esengo lke!</i>	So much joy!

Children *mokondi massana* are also the occasion of a lot of fun as children’s contagious good humour and clowning makes people laugh a lot.

Staying with Nyemu, his wife Ai and their children in May 2013 in the forest camp Mokakwa. little Thomas, a four-year-old, and his six-year-old friend Kumu were holding a forest spirit performance (*mokondi massana*) for us the evening. Monoi (25) was playing the drums while Thomas’ sisters Tokabe (10), Niesi (7) and Monoi’s daughter Mondomba (10) were singing with the encouragements and advice of their mothers, grandmothers and aunts. Just like with *Bolobe* spirits, Tokabe and Mondomba would do *edyānguma*, the dance movement used by women of Bonguinda in every *Bolobe* performance (see figure 7). The evening was going well and Thomas’s spirit was giving a very energetic performance, until Tokabe made fun of the way Thomas’s spirit would hold branches in his hands. She got up and aped the spirit with imaginary branches, which made everybody laugh. Thomas, hopping mad, refused to continue and made his spirit leave the camp. The performance was thus over. Thomas’s parents tried to make him change his mind at first, but seeing he was too infuriated they gave up and the singing was done for that evening.

As the boys from Bonguinda who perform *Mopepe* are usually very young (around four-years old), they do not master dancing skills yet, and it can be very entertaining

for adults to watch children learn to perform forest spirit *mokondi massana* and perfect their singing and dancing skills. Adults are very attentive to children's progresses, and often comment on children's qualities and flaws, such as the energy children put into the dancing, their ability to perform specific dance movements or to interact with the girls as dancers.

Some children are faster learners than others, and toddlers or children who can be shy and unsure as to what they should do are the most highly encouraged by their parents and siblings. In Bonguinda, adults give children tips as to which movements they should do, like "beat the ground with your feet like this!" (*kia bona na mako, kia na bude!*) or "move your body, make bigger movements!" (*bomba ndjo, bina na bude!*). Adults will even sometimes stand up to show one movement or to rectify the spirits' postures<sup>21</sup>.

Most of the members of an Mbendjele camp or village are connected by kinship ties and live in co-presence. Widlok pointed out that in immediate-return societies such as the #Akhoe Hai//om of northern Namibia, the physical presence influences the act of sharing. "One's mere bodily presence, underlined by addressing the other person in particular ways, is always a demand for being acknowledged as a partner, a personal being with legitimate needs" (Widlok 2013: 20-21). Living in co-presence seems to be a fertile social context for the practice of sharing at a large social scale beyond the nuclear family. While Widlok analysed the dynamics of sharing material goods and food, this chapter investigates the way children learn the value of sharing non-material social products such as positive emotions and how the physical presence of adults during children's games facilitates the process of sharing cultural knowledge.

Boyette (2013) found that four- to sixteen-year-old Aka forager children spent considerable time in mixed-aged child groups, but they were still within visual range of an adult 64 percent of the day and within six meters of parents or other adults 45 percent of the day" (quoted by Hewlett 2014: 251). Other studies described similar patterns among the Aka (Neuwelt-Trunzer 1981), Efe (Morelli 1987; Rogoff & al. 2010), and Baka (Kamei 2005). This constant blending of individuals' relations

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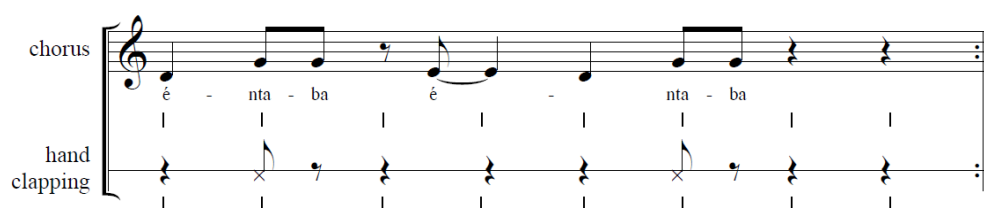
<sup>21</sup> See appendix 2 n°4.

makes the whole spectrum of knowledge that exists in the community available to children.

In Bonguinda, girls have numerous games which allow them to benefit from their peers' knowledge and develop their singing and dancing skills. Games such as *anasi*, *pfembe* or *epatipati* are specifically designed to learn and improve specific features of women's forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*).

*Anasi* (see figures 8 & 9) is a game regularly played by girls in Bonguinda. They form a circle, and sing together while clapping hands. One girl will go towards the girl standing on her left, and do one step with her before going towards the center of the circle. She will dance back to the circle and take the position of the girl originally standing on her right. As one girl goes toward the center (blue arrows), the girl on her right will go towards her left (red arrows), to give the first girl her position in the circle<sup>22</sup>.

When this game is played by teenager girls, it can get quite complex as several girls at different positions in the circle start their moves together, so that everyone is moving at the same time, switching positions at a quick pace. Due to the complexity of this game in which players have to concentrate on their own moves while paying attention to others' movements, the songs are usually quite simple to sing. Here is an example of one *anasi* song. The girls clap their hands together on the first beat of each "*nta*".



**Figure 10:** "*Ntaba*": the goat (in lingala)

*Pfembe* is another game played by girls in mixed-aged groups, from four-years-old to around twenty-years old, usually during the day. Children gather in a curved line, and in turns come in front of the line, make a dance movement before going at the end of the line. As girls go, the dance forms a circle. During this game, girls sing and clap hands. The transcription below is an example of one of the songs used for this

<sup>22</sup> See appendix 2 n°10.

game. On every hand clap, a girl steps in front of the line to dance. Each girl only dances for four beats before going back into the line. In this song, there are no lyrics as girls sing on non-significant syllables (see figure 11).



**Figure 11:** Pŕembe song (no lyrics)

To play *epatipati* (see figure 12), girls sit facing each other in two lines, legs resting on each other. Each girl plays with the girl sitting directly in front of her, and grabs her hands in a series of movements. During this game, girls often sing sophisticated songs with sometimes three or four parts, depending on the singing skills of the girls present<sup>23</sup>. This is a transcription of a song used in *epatipati*. In this example, there are only two singing parts, one being yodeled i.e. switching from head voice to chest voice quickly and sang in a high-pitched register. This transcription is a simplified version but girls often improvise and add new singing parts while playing. I used different symbols for the hand clapping, to differentiate a strong clap from less loud claps.



**Figure 13:** Epatipati song "Esobe" (savanna)

<sup>23</sup> See appendix 2 n°11.

Lewis talks about Mbendjele cultural concepts (*ekila*, *mosāmbō*, *moadjo*<sup>24</sup>, *massana*), which “exert an anonymous but pervasive pedagogic action that prompts each Mbendjele person to understand egalitarianism as a valued political, moral, and economic orientation” (Lewis 2014: 238), and play is the structural driver of this “pedagogic action”.

Several authors defined “play” (Blanchard & Cheska 1985; Pellegrini 1995; Pellegrini & Smith 1993; Yawkey & Pellegrini 1984), and notably Csikszentmihalyi who developed the “flow” theory, based on a study of adults who are sometimes so absorbed into certain playful activities that they seem to “flow” along with it. Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (1990: 4).

Csikszentmihalyi’s and other studies highlighted the specific state of mind inherent to play and the efficacy of play in learning processes. Gray built on their studies to define play as an “activity that is (1) self-chosen and self-directed; (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) structured by mental rules; (4) imaginative; and (5) produced in an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind” (Gray 2009: 480). According to this definition, players are participating freely as one cannot be forced to play a game, and play is defined by the mental attitude that a person brings to it. Any activity, like building a house, depends on one’s decision to be a part of the game or not.

### **The player’s state of mind, cooperation and cultural transmission**

It has been shown by many psychological studies (e.g. Guralnick 1993; Rieber 1996; Topping & Ehly 1998) that the players’ state of mind during a game is “ideal for creativity and the learning of new skills” (Gray 2009:484). Play requires an active and alert mind, and during play “there is reduced consciousness of self and time” (*ibid.*). Ethnographic data on Pygmy populations shows that the structure of egalitarianism - as a social system -is very similar to the structure of play. Gray summarized the

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<sup>24</sup> *Moadjo* is an institutionalized process of shaming. “Some time after an event in which someone behaved particularly stupidly or unacceptably, one or two women will rise and begin comically re-enacting the event” (Lewis 2014: 11). See also appendix 2 n°14.

crucial characteristics of both play and egalitarianism as “voluntary participation, autonomy, equality, sharing, and consensual decision making” (Gray 2009: 484).

An egalitarian system such as the Mbendjele’s values equally each individual’s needs. Individuals’ joys and sorrow have an impact on the people surrounding them, and therefore can affect the whole community’s well-being<sup>25</sup>. Consequently, each individual’s needs have to be answered in order to ensure the community’s well-being. It happens that the same mechanisms exist in the structure of play itself: “the equality of play is not the equality of sameness but the equality that comes from granting equal validity to the unique needs and wishes of every player” (Gray 2009: 485).

Cooperation is one of the pillars of the Mbendjele’s egalitarian system, and is expressed in every *massana* activity. Several authors have highlighted the importance of cooperation in hunter-gatherer egalitarian societies (Cashdan 1980; Flanagan 1989; Ingold 1986; Kelly 1995). As Lewis pointed out, “there are no Mbendjele games that involve competition, or the emergence of winners or losers. The emphasis is on combining together to increase enjoyment through cooperation” (Lewis 2002: 131), Mbendjele children to experience an egalitarian ethic through playful processes. I will now describe several games which emphasise cooperation while allowing children to perfect their singing and dancing skills.

Similarly to *anasi*, *pfembe* or *epatipati* described above, *esule* is a girls’ game which helps children to develop their knowledge and skills for forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). *Esule* consists in gathering very close to each other, holding each others’ shoulders, and running in-step through the village or camp singing songs that include words as well as vowel sounds (see figure 14). This style is the exact replica of some *Dgoku* performance’s dance steps and songs. It is difficult to synchronize a lot of girls so that they can run at the same pace, agree to sing a song, and coordinate to make the game happen. *Esule* teaches the girls to cooperate, and the neophyte girls become familiar with key parts of *Dgoku* performances.

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<sup>25</sup> This issue will be developed further in the following section.



*Esule* is also very much appreciated by teenage boys, who often gather and watch the game carefully, exchanging comments on the girls' performance. Girls sometimes intentionally put on a show for boys, running in front of them instead of going around the village. Lewis pointed out that "doing *massana* educates and genders Mbendjele" (2014: 236). Like equivalent boys' games, *Esule* allows girls to learn how to show off their femininity and female solidarity and strength. On the other side, the boys learn to appreciate femal qualities and to respect their style of expression without trying to disturb or interrupt them.

Lewis emphasised that "performing [spirit-plays] inculcates an egalitarian aesthetic of gendered interaction" (Lewis 2014: 236), and this aesthetic is explicit in the staging of children *massana*. As girls play these games from a very young age, when they are old enough to be initiated they have already learnt the key elements of *Dgɔku* performance's dance steps and songs.

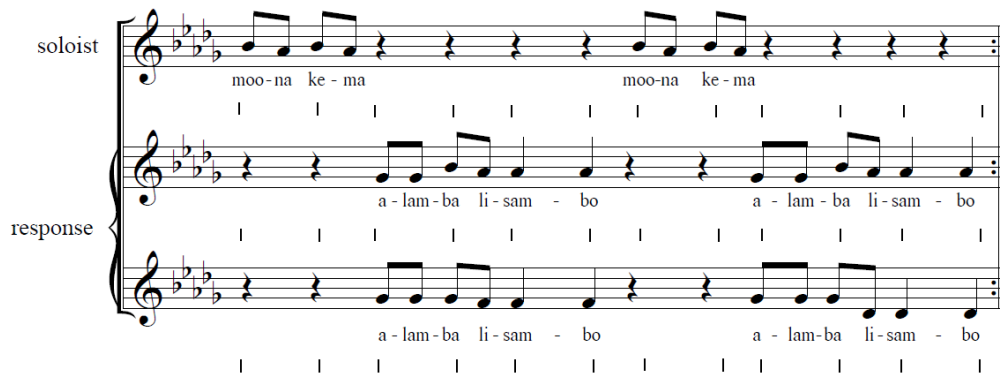
*Dgɔku* initiation is about learning women's hidden knowledge on fertility and child health (Lewis 2014: 237) and magic associated to the *Dgɔku* spirit on the sacred area (*njānga*). Still, all the performative aspects of *Dgɔku* performance's public part are well-known by the girls long before they are initiated and able to participate to *Dgɔku* performances. Lewis showed that

"certain spirit plays such as *Dgɔku* and *Yelle* for women or *Sho* and *Niabula* for men focus on celebrating and cultivating gender differences ... Dancing as one interwoven body, this is 'Woman' speaking to men. Men, in turn, speak as 'Man' to the women during spirit plays ... A pattern of assertion and counterassertion is a central dynamic maintaining egalitarian relations between the sexes, allowing each group to publicly define, celebrate, and express their value to the rest of the society" (*ibid.*).

These gender dynamics so structurally central to the practice of Mbendjele egalitarianism are already present in games played by children as young as ten-months-old. Yet, men and women's regular expressions of power are balanced by a strong emphasis on cooperation between individuals. In children's *massana*, a large number of games without gendered roles are played by girls and boys together. Such games usually played by toddlers and young children (between two- and ten-years-old) allow children to learn cooperation mechanisms through play.

*Moona kema* (see figure 15) is played by both girls and boys, during the day or in the evening. Children form a line, on all fours, touching each other. While singing, a child

will climb on the others' backs, until he arrives at the end of the line. He will then sit on all fours and the first in line will get up and climb on the others. This is contrary to other more sophisticated games, which have a repertoire of several songs (like *elānda* or *anasi*), every *moona kema* is played with one song (see figure 16). One child sings the soloist part, while the other children complete the song by singing the two responsive parts.



**Figure 16:** *Moona kema a lamba lisambo*: “the child monkey climbs up the branches”

Just like *moona kema*, *babubu* (see plate 2) is a game played by small children. They sit down tightly one in front of the other, legs apart and extended. Then they sing while swinging their upper body from left to right in rhythm, touching the ground with their hands on alternate sides while singing. They simulate being in a river boat, using their arms as paddles. Another child, usually the oldest, stands in front or beside them, and speaks the soloist part while the others sing the response. The lyrics are as follows: -“Where?” -“Ahead!” -“Who stole my bananas?” - “It’s me!” - “Who stole my peanuts?” -“It’s me!” -“Who stole my wild yams?” -“It’s me!” -“Watch out! There’s a venomous millipede at your feet!” At that point of the game, all the children get up and grab one foot in their hands while jumping on the other foot, simulating the pain caused by *ngonggo*, a venomous millipede<sup>26</sup>.

*Dguli* is a game which has already been described by Lewis:

“*Dguli* is a gendered version of ‘tug of war’, in which the boys are against the girls. However there is no line to be traversed by one side or the other in order to win. Rather, the tugging goes on back and forth until one side or the other, or both sides, collapse with great hilarity.” (Lewis, 2002: 130).

However, in Bonguinda, this game was not gendered. Boys and girls would mix up, and children on each side of the rope were organized so that there was a balance of

<sup>26</sup> See appendix 2 n°12.

force between the two groups. Therefore, children would sometimes change side if one group happened to be much stronger than the other. This way of playing *nguli* put the emphasis on cooperation and balance, as the game is not considered entertaining if the combination of children on both sides is not roughly equivalent.

*Dgolio* (monkey eagle) is usually played by girls but young boys sometimes join the players. One girl stands alone, facing the other girls who stand in line one behind the other, holding their arms. While singing a speech-style song, the girls jump left then right in rhythm, before accelerating their movements until the girl facing the line jumps to catch the girl in front of her. Girls on the line try to jump on the right or left side to avoid being caught by the monkey eagle. Once one girl has been caught, she stands aside, and the game keeps going until all the girls have been caught.

*Mokpombo* is played by both boys and girls and is much fun for the players. Children form a circle and hold each others' hands. They then run in circle, going as fast as they can before someone drops his neighbor's hand and eventually falls, dragging down all the players in general hilarity.

*Māngbese* is played by girls and boys and each gender has a specific role to play. This game provokes lots of laughter because the aim is for the boys to show their naked bottoms to the girls. This game is often played at night, sometimes during adult forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). Girls are chased around by boys who try to scare them by cornering them and drop their pants at the last moment to show their bottoms. The girls scream and laugh while running away.

Such games are daily played by children, and so children highly participate to the village or camp's level of 'good sounds' while spreading positive emotions. The importance of children's *massana* to the community is most obvious in adults' behavior. If adults rarely physically play with children during children's *massana*, they participate by giving advice and commenting on children's accomplishments. They share children's excitement and, as the games unfold, share their disappointments and joys. Children's play is not pushed aside but constantly valued by being attended to by all present, and so brought to the forefront of the community's life.

One quiet morning in the fishing camp Makana, children were about to leave the camp as they had planned to go in the forest nearby to swing on lianas (*isɛmbi*).

Pélagie, a twenty-five-year-old woman and mother of two of the children, specifically asked the group of children to stay in the camp to play where adults could see them and enjoy their games. Children accepted to stay and instead of swinging built little huts (*ekuta*). Pélagie and other women present in the camp advised girls on technical skills such as how to arrange thin flexible tree trunks or position the large marantacea leaves on top of the huts. Children lit a fire and invented stories, girls pretending to cook or to calm a teething baby while boys pretended they were getting ready to go hunting. All adults in the camp enjoyed offering advice to the children or providing a commentary on events as they unfurled. Adults built on children's stories, and suggested actions such as sharpening spears and machetes or getting hunting traps ready. Children would take the suggestions they liked and ignore the ones they disliked. Adults were smiling at children and enjoying the moment very much.

Such scenes are common both in villages and forest camps, and the enjoyment of Mbendjele adults in participating in children's games demonstrates how central play is in cultural transmission processes. Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza indicated that "enculturation of pygmies is early; about 70% of all skills have been acquired by age 10, and more than 80% (practically all those of significance for survival) by age 15" (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986: 933). As children spend most of their time playing, a substantial amount of cultural knowledge is transmitted during playful moments, often involving music and dance. In addition to their participation to children's *massana*, adults use traditional story-telling (*gano*) to transmit Mbendjele values to children.

### **Egalitarian values represented in *gano* stories**

"Because of their egalitarian foundation, hunter-gatherer religions are playful in ways that go well beyond the general fashion in which all religions can be thought of as play ... The hunter-gatherer deities themselves are playful and even comical beings, not stern judges. They are not all-powerful, all-wise, all-good, or all-bad. Like people, they are sometimes good, sometimes bad, occasionally wise, often foolish, and generally unpredictable. They are not particularly concerned with human morality. Their interactions with people can most often be described as

whimsical. A deity may hurt or help a person just because he or she feels like it, not because the person deserves it, and in that sense, at least, the deities are personifications of the natural phenomena, such as the weather, on which the people depend and with which they must contend.”  
Gray (2009: 497)

Tale of a *Gano* story: “we have to manage people’s things properly.”

One evening, in the fishing camp of Makana, Monoi (25) decided to tell *gano* stories to the camp. He sat down in the men’s area (*mbānjo*), while children gathered around him and made themselves comfortable to listen. Monoi is a charismatic man, and an enthusiastic story-teller. He never tells the same story in the same way as he constantly adds and removes parts of the stories, making his *gano* develop with him as he grows older. One of the stories Monoi told that evening came from the ancient times, when animals could talk to humans. I here give a translation of the story as Monoi told it that evening. Often, people participated and commented on the story’s events. I try here to include some of people’s comments as the story goes. The main character of the story is *Sumbu* (Chimpanzee). Secondary characters appear along the story: *Komba* (the Creator), *Dgānda* (Monkey), *Mombɛnga*, (a *Bilo*), *Embongo* (Leopard) and *Etebe* (Frog). This story is full of unexpected twists and turns, and tackles various subjects such as the catching of a forest spirit, the Pygmy/*Bilo* relationship, and rules of sharing. Issues are approached with humour, which allow people to project themselves in the story and easily appreciate rules of behaviour<sup>27</sup>.

“One day, in the ancient times, a child managed to catch a spirit (*mokondi*) on his own in the forest. He jumped on the spirit as soon as he saw him, and did not listen to the spirit’s supplications. He beat him until the spirit fell unconscious. The child put his newly-found spirit on his shoulder and headed back to his village. On their way; the spirit begged the child to let him go. The child refused, and told the spirit that his new role would be to beat up Chimpanzee [Monoi used a Mbendjele expression, which describes a red and swollen face, as if stung by dozens of bees while collecting honey]. “Wait until I bring you back to my camp”, said the child. Chimpanzee was nearby, and overheard the conversation.

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<sup>27</sup> An abstract of Monoi’s story is provided in appendix 2 n°13.

“Has a new spirit been found?” he asked himself. Intrigued, Chimpanzee followed the child to his village, and found the spirit tied up and lying on the ground as if he was dead. “They killed someone here!” thought Chimpanzee. Meanwhile, Komba (the creator) arrived in the village. “Why do you go in the forest to capture people?” he asked. The BaAka answered that this spirit had been disturbing people in their dreams, and so they had tied him up. “It’s not a big deal” said Komba, “I take care of all of you”. [At that point of the story, Monoi indicated that Komba was a very impolite character and that he was wise, but mean].

After that incident, people went their ways, and Chimpanzee said that he would go for a long trip in the forest (*adwa mongo*, *litt.* “going on a long journey hunting and gathering in the forest”). Somewhere in the forest, Chimpanzee found five palm trees [the kind suitable for the harvest of palm wine]. He felled the trees and started to collect the wine, without any consideration whether the trees’ were claimed by anyone. “I will start a new exploitation of palm wine here” he thought. He went to his wife, and asked her for some containers, before going back to the plantation to collect the wine. Once he collected the wine from all the trees, he walked back to his camp and shared the wine with his wife. The next morning, Chimpanzee went back to his newly-found palm trees plantation, but the wine was not ready yet for the morning harvest.

A few hours later, Monkey -the one who claimed the trees- came to visit his palm tree plantation and witnessed the devastation. He rushed back to the camp and made a scandal, looking for the thief. A fierce argument began at the camp as random people were wrongly accused, and the argument went on until the evening. Chimpanzee came back to the camp, heard the argument and became angry. “I wish Monkey’s mother had haemorrhoids! Monkey is causing me so much trouble!” he said. Chimpanzee decided to sleep near the palm trees that night. “If I leave, someone else is going to harvest the wine”, he thought. “I need to set a trap.”

The next morning, Chimpanzee woke up at dawn. He drank a lot of wine, and lay hidden under dead leaves to wait for Monkey's arrival. When Monkey arrived, Chimpanzee decided that he would make a spirit (*mokondi*) out of Monkey. "This way, I will have my own spirit", he thought. "Come on and sit down" he told Monkey. He gave him several glasses of palm wine, until Monkey was completely drunk. Chimpanzee kept filling up Monkey's glass, and secretly added a magical mixture of plants. Then Chimpanzee started to talk to Monkey as if he was a spirit: "It makes me sad, my poor spirit. I was surprised by your scream, and that's how I found you here. Now I have to find a song for you, the new spirit I just found."

[At that point of the story, children spent a few minutes commenting on Chimpanzee's deeds. From their point of view, Chimpanzee was really mean, nothing more than a thief and a liar. Adults also strongly disapproved Chimpanzee's behaviour but at the same time everybody laughed at his trickery ways.]

Chimpanzee continued to talk to Monkey: "You are the spirit I caught with my own strength. Give me a song so that I can go back to my village." Monkey was too drunk to realise what was happening, and followed Chimpanzee. When Chimpanzee arrived at his village and told the story of his so-called spirit, his *Bilo* was delighted. "You found a spirit? And a song too? Where is your spirit now?" he asked. Chimpanzee answered that he had left the spirit on the sacred path (*njānga*), a few meters away in the forest. The *Bilo* was carrying his gun. He began to put it aside to go and see the spirit, but Chimpanzee stopped him: "Leave the gun with me, I will hide it somewhere". At the same time, Chimpanzee was thinking: "I will keep this gun forever!"

Then Chimpanzee spoke to the village: "You, men, go get some leaves. And you, women, weave some skirts (*bandudu*). Get ready for my spirit!" People went and made skirts. While they were preparing them, people discussed the matter: "So Monkey is a spirit? I cannot believe that Chimpanzee found a spirit on his own!" [Around Monoi, people were

hilarious and could not stop laughing. They made fun of the villagers, who could not see through Chimpanzee's trickery.]

Chimpanzee asked his *Bilo* for a plastic container of palm wine and some smoke, so that he could call his newly acquired spirit. He shared the wine and gave women their half. People sat down and got ready to welcome Chimpanzee's spirit. Chimpanzee went on the sacred path with his share of alcohol and smoke, and gave all of it to Monkey. Monkey started to put on spirit's clothing. "It seems that today, I'm going to be a cheat", Monkey told himself.

But Chimpanzee had other plans. He had pretended to organize a forest spirit ritual (*mokondi massana*) in order to acquire goods from his *Bilo*. Now that he had had his wine and smoke, he did not feel like performing anymore. Instead, he turned towards Leopard. "Give me your spear", he said, before adding: "this spear is bad. I need a proper spear. I want the good spear, the one you hide under your bed over there." Leopard surrendered and gave Chimpanzee what he had asked for. Chimpanzee applied a magical mixture on the spear and got up. "Now that I have a strong spear, we will go hunting", he said. He gathered his friends around him: "Leopard you need to be fierce and you too, Frog. I want you to hunt with all your heart." Leopard reassured Chimpanzee: "Do not worry, we heard you, Frog and I. When you tell us something, we listen closely."

And off they went for a big elephant hunt. Chimpanzee gave them some advice on the coming hunt along the way: "We have to be very careful. I will go in front, and you two will follow me slowly." [Monoï started a song that everyone followed and which lasted for several minutes. The lyrics of the song describe the hunt: "Come out, I'm getting closer" (*ufa na sukanaka*).]

After a while, Leopard got tired. "We went too far! I am going to look for wild pigs." Chimpanzee prepared his gun and they started to look for wild pigs tracks. Thanks to Chimpanzee's gun, they killed a wild pig, and Leopard started to cut the meat to share it. He kept the heart apart in



order to give it to Frog, who had given the pig the fatal blow with his spear. But Chimpanzee took the heart for himself. "My wife is going to cook this heart just right!" he said. Leopard and Frog tried to reason with Chimpanzee, explaining him that it was Komba's will that the hunter who killed the animal ate his heart. But Chimpanzee did not listen, and started to dry the heart on the fire. "It is my wife who is going to cook this heart, I am telling you. Frog can live with an empty stomach for now. I walk in front of Komba, and he is walking behind me."

The next morning, Frog left the hunting camp early, and went to his mother's village. Offended by Chimpanzee's behaviour, Leopard left the camp as well. On his way, he met Komba who asked him: "What happened? Why are you leaving the hunting party so soon?" Leopard told Komba about Chimpanzee's rude and ill-mannered behaviour as he kept the pig's heart for himself, and explained why he and Frog had left. Komba decided to intervene and went to see Chimpanzee: "I cannot accept this kind of behaviour" said Komba. "I know. It's my entire fault" piteously agreed Chimpanzee. Komba hit Chimpanzee once on his back to show his disapproval. [Monoï ended his tale saying: "The story ends on Chimpanzee's life lesson: we have to respect other people's things."]

### Discussion

Chimpanzee (*Sumbu*) is a recurrent character in *gano* stories, and his ambivalence makes him a very interesting figure to study. Although he is repeatedly depicted as a liar and a thief, Chimpanzee also appears as a great hunter and as a person good at tricking people. In an egalitarian society such as the Mbendjele's, one's charisma is of great value. Indeed, charisma is the driving force of cooperation, as any cooperative activity requires participants' good-will. But Chimpanzee's trickery ways stand as a behaviour which should not be followed. , Chimpanzee managed to trick Monkey (*Dgānda*) to pretend that he was a spirit (*mokondi*). He then tricked the villagers to participate in a forest spirit performance (*mokondi massana*), before convincing his friends, Leopard (*Embonjo*) and Frog (*etebe*), to go hunting. Chimpanzee's greed and disregard of rules of society such as *ekila* prohibitions are

condemned by *Komba*, who punished Chimpanzee. *Komba* is an appreciated character in an egalitarian context where it is rude to judge others, and becomes a neutral figure who expresses displeasure and corrects excess. *Komba*'s disapproval of Chimpanzee's actions shows that greed, trickery in excess and disrespect of the society's rules are condemned by the Mbendjele.

In everyday life, Mbendjele often refer to *Bilo* villagers as 'my' *Bilo*. This way of denominating a *Bilo* person to which an Mbendjele feels affection reflects acceptance that they are in a barter relationship, in which the *Bilo* provides manufactured goods (such as machetes, cooking pots, clothes, cigarettes, shoes, etc) and money in exchange for work (the Mbendjele can work in the *Bilo*'s fields, hunt game, fetch water and fire wood or construct houses), and forest goods (bushmeat, fish, edible leaves and wild yams, honey). For the Mbendjele of Bonguinda, people commonly refer to 'their' *Bilo* just as *Bilo* from the neighbouring villages of Mombelu and Djoubé refer to 'their' Pygmies. Partnerships of *Bilo*/Mbendjele barter partners can be unbalanced and often are. *Bilo* often promise goods they never provide, and Mbendjele often promise work they never furnish. Robillard & Bahuchet already pointed out that "Westerners and African researchers often mistake a local terminology of belonging and dependence ('my pygmy') with slavery, guardianship and real property" (2012:29, translation from French my own).

This *gano* story illustrates the risks that trickery and deceit can hold for the one employing such tactics. Pygmies can sometimes be responsible for the unbalance in the Pygmy/*Bilo* relationship as Chimpanzee lied to his *Bilo* to obtain goods, which is a legitimate Mbendjele behaviour. He received what he asked for, and yet he did not deliver the spirit performance he had promised. Chimpanzee's greed is condemned by Monoi himself but also by all adults and children, who commented "Chimpanzee is so rude!" (*Sumbu adie na botiya e!*) or "Look, what a thief he is!" (*Ta moto a moyibi!*).

Furthermore, the story valorise the importance of catching a forest spirit, despite the difficulty and danger, and how happy it makes people if brought back to the camp. Indeed, the story begins with the proper way that a wild forest spirit can be caught, even by a child, but then describes how Chimpanzee's greed leads him to seek to copy the boy to rid himself of Monkey's claims to own the palm trees he has tapped.

Chimpanzee immediately received goods from his *Bilo* (a clever thing to achieve in Mbendjele eyes, but not without consequences) when he pretended to have caught a spirit and he obtained people's approval, help and support to dance his new spirit. Selfishness and greed are depicted in this story as having embarrassing and negative consequences – personified in what happens to Sumbu when he takes his trickery too far, and ignores the rules of society.

Key Mbendjele values are displayed in the story. The child who caught the spirit did not brag afterwards. Those who were deceived by Chimpanzee and never had their spirit performance did not try to get revenge. Leopard and Frog, when disapproving Chimpanzee's behaviour in the hunting camp, went away silently choosing an avoidance strategy, without even telling Chimpanzee they were leaving. *Komba* is the only one who is seen to punish people yet this is perceived negatively by the story-teller, as Monoï asserted that *Komba* is a mean and impolite character. *Komba* is thus depicted as being the only being allowed to judge others, while people should avoid judgments and punishments. *Gano* stories are a privileged access to Mbendjele egalitarian values, and they participate to children's learning of Mbendjele identity. Relations between individuals and groups are explored in and out of the community, and clear rules are exposed and wrapped up in a humorous manner, allowing explicit discourses about right and wrong, and where legitimate tricks are taken too far and so cause trouble with others.

### **The 'collectiveness' of emotions**

According to Mbendjele from Bonguinda, feelings and emotions are a serious matter, and in everyday life, people are very attentive to each other's states of mind. Each individuals' feelings connect to form a web running through the whole community and which can resonate to create collective emotions, formed from the intertwining of personal feelings. I focus here not on the psychology of the individual's feelings, but rather on the collective emotions shared by a group. With Csordas, my concern is "the cultural elaboration of sensory engagement, not preoccupation with one's own body as an isolated phenomenon' (Csordas 1993: 139).

My interest with emotions has to do with the importance Mbendjele give them in the everyday discussions they have about their community's life -most notably express during *massana* activities. Dance and music play a major role in the bringing out of emotions during performances, and the understanding of musical emotion has become a major scientific challenge in the fields of psychology and neurosciences (Bonini Baraldi 2009: 257). Damasio emphasized that "the biological purpose of the emotions is clear, and emotions are not a dispensable luxury. Emotions are curious adaptations that are part and parcel of the machinery with which organisms regulate survival" (Damasio 2000: 50).

In order to examine the role of emotions in Mbendjele society, I look at the management of emotions in everyday life and during forest spirit performances, and consider the way the Mbendjele egalitarian rules of sharing include affective sharing. In this section, I first review anthropological studies on emotions, before focusing on Mbendjele's own way of considering emotions at an individual and collective level.

## **Emotions in anthropology**

The study of emotions has long suffered from the philosophical European dichotomy between mind and body, which systematically opposed reason to passion and devalued emotions as irrational forces (Svasek & Milton 2005). Since the 1970s, anthropologists have begun to consider the extent to which emotional dynamics are influenced by social structures and cultural rules. It has been underscored by numerous authors that cultural meaning systems are of primary importance when experiencing emotions. Levy argued that emotions play a central role in forming the actor's sense of his or her relation to a social world (1973). Bailey highlighted the importance of emotional experience, pointing out that emotions are a primary idiom for defining and negotiating social relations in a moral order (1983).

Turner identified the importance of emotions in the practice of rituals. He showed that "emotions and praxis ... give life and colouring to the values and norms" (Turner 1967: 39). When individually felt emotions are structured by ritual processes they tend to serve to emphasise culturally important aspects and reinforce culturally coded emotions and values. Musicking performances seek to establish a road plan

for individuals' emotions to follow, and when done well may dissolve each's sense of individuality into a common collective emotionality shared among all present. Such processes serve to inculcate distinctive emotional patterning among participants –so that certain emotional dispositions are experienced, understood as effective or valued, and so more likely to be so coded by the participant outside the ritual context. “Associated with the process of revealing the unknown, invisible, or the hidden is the process of making public what is private or making social what is personal” (Turner 1967: 50). Personal emotions hence become social, and the line between private and public is blurred.

Rosaldo explored the mechanisms of the collective sharing of emotions and showed that emotions can be considered as “*embodied* thoughts”, implying that emotions are “both feeling and cognitive constructions” (Rosaldo, 1984: 183). After Leavitt, I also use Spinoza's model which sees emotions as “experiences learned and expressed in the body, in social interactions through the mediation of systems of sign, verbal and non-verbal” (Spinoza 1985[1677]) quoted by Leavitt 1996: 526). These models tend to consider human bodies as “socialized”, and challenge ideas about the *homo economicus* and his selfish interests and feelings. As Leavitt summarized, bodies “normally exist as groups and in interaction rather than as isolated entities” (Leavitt 1996: 524). Building on this insight, I will focus on the ways that Mbendjele *massana* practices act as catalysts for promoting collective, culturally valued and salient emotions so that they are shared by the group, and in so doing serve as markers of identity in the group.

White developed what appeared to be a useful concept in the context of this ethnography of *massana*. The concept of “emotive institutions” (White 2005) acknowledges the significance of the role played by socially organized activities in facilitating and creating culturally meaningful forms of emotions. As Abu-Lughod & Lutz pointed out, “emotional acts are simultaneously bodily movements, symbolic vehicles that reproduce and affect social relations, and practices that reveal the effects of power” (Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990: 12). In an Mbendjele context, *massana* can be considered as an ‘emotive institution’ according to Whitehouse's definition since *massana* activities offer the optimal conditions for the sharing and treatment of collective emotions.

The mechanisms of sharing emotions are profoundly linked to aesthetics in ritual performances, and the efficiency of key aspects of a ritual are often based on its aesthetics (Kapferer 2005). The aesthetic elements make a performance particular, and distinct from other communities' as well as establishing a space for the individuals to identify themselves with certain aesthetics that define them as members of a community (Lewis 2013). Before analysing certain aesthetic elements of Mbendjele performances in chapters 3 and 4, I first present specific ways that Mbendjele valorise and interpret emotions. Using an ethnographic vignette, I describe how a personal experience revealed the way individual emotions are interpreted as intrinsically collective in Mbendjele society.

### **How Mbendjele interpret and value emotions**

In November 2013, I was living in a forest camp with Nyemu's family (about thirty people, children included). We had come to this camp for fishing, as it was the big rainy season. A large and deep stream was passing by, and Nyemu had found a good place to set up his dam. The dam requires a lot of work to be made. The camp's men did one each, which required several days of work. Women worked hard too, as they were cutting some earth blocks from dry land to use to seal off the water flow. During all these days of work, people sang a lot, and were constantly encouraging others to sing. Ai told me that the singing would help for the fishing. Loads of singing meant loads of fish trapped. When people were chilling out in the camp, women would systematically get together to sing. Similarly, women would sing while cutting the undergrowth. These songs are specifically designed to ensure the fishing's success<sup>28</sup>.

Young men were very efficient and worked hard to construct the dams, and then put them in place with women's earth blocks. Once everything was in place, Nyemu and his wife or one of his daughters visited the dam every morning and every evening. Large amounts of fish were collected and smoked over the fire. Lots of fire wood had to be gathered, and men as well as women did their part.

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<sup>28</sup> See appendix 2 n°16.

Everything was going just fine, though I was feeling very depressed. I had been in the field for a whole year and in RoC for six months, though the end of my research was planned for July, eight months later. I felt very lonely as my apprenticeship of Mbendjee was going much too slow in my view, and I was struggling to speak or to understand what people were saying. Christmas was coming, and it would be the second year that I would pass away from my family. My brother had had a baby daughter, but I did not get a chance to see her being so far away from them. All of this made me feel really sad and depressed, and I was becoming more and more melancholic. For a couple of days, I did not speak to anyone, and would stay on my own with my melancholic thoughts.

During these two days, few fish were collected in the traps and all of a sudden the fishing party was not so good. People noticed that something was wrong with me, though they did not know what. They observed me from a distance and despaired to understand what was going on. After two days, Nyemu came to me and very gently, told me that I should not stay like that; if something was wrong, I should let him know. "Look, he said, your sadness is affecting us all. See, there aren't anymore fish. You need to get better so that we can eat lots of fish." Seeing that I was upsetting everyone, I did my best to ignore my feelings and got back into camp life. The next day, I went to gather fire wood, I played with the children and cooked with women. Pretending to be fine helped me to go through my little depression, and I did get better. When I went to visit the dam with Nyemu the following day, it was full of fish. We brought them back to the camp and everyone ate a lot. Fish were everywhere: in pots, smoking on the fire, waiting to be cooked in bowls. "See, said Nyemu with a little smile, we eat fish now!"

This anecdote made me realize how important individual emotions are to the community. If one individual is feeling bad, it affects the whole community's happiness and success in the food quest. From their point of view, the fact that we did not catch fish for a couple of days was obviously my fault. Constructionists would agree with the Mbendjele that "emotions are social, and not purely private, in nature" (Leavitt 1996: 522). Even though a feeling is a very personal experience, the meaning associated with it is interpreted in culturally biased terms.

A common way to promote positive emotions or disapprove of negative ones is to perform a *mosāmbō*. *Mosāmbō* is a stylised form of public speaking, which allows anyone in camp to address the whole community to talk about something personal or of concern to the whole community. Often, *mosāmbō* are ways to condemn bad behaviour, for instance not sharing properly, or being angry and fighting with each other. It can also be a way to promote positive emotions, encouraging children to play and laugh or people to participate in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). There is a constant encouragement to feel positive emotions in everyday life, the aim being that when the camp is happy, the forest will offer its fruits abundantly and all will enjoy good times.

In everyday life and especially in forest camps, people live in co-presence i.e. in close physical proximity. Individuals share everything as houses have no walls or large entrances, and many aspects of life are shared. If a child is sick at night for instance, everyone is woken up and adults talk from inside their beds to give advice to the child's parents. For the Mbendjele, the forest is the place for intimate encounters as couples meet in the forest to have sexual intercourse. The forest is also a privileged place to hide things. In the camp on the contrary, everything is seen by everyone, highs and lows, as activities done and emotions felt by individuals and groups are acknowledged collectively in everyday life. The physical proximity is reinforced during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) where people often touch each other or rest on each other's bodies and create the optimal conditions for an intense emotional performance. During forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), sitting next to a woman, shoulder-to-shoulder and leg-to-leg while singing loudly in her direction is a demand to share music and positive emotions. Widlok and other ethnographers working in egalitarian societies have observed that "persons who seek a share stay close to those from whom they expect a share" (Widlok 2017: 72). The behaviours Widlok observed regarding the sharing of food items is similar to the Mbendjele behaviour regarding the sharing of non-material social products. Co-presence is a necessary condition for the sharing of valued social products such as positive emotions or music. The management of emotions is a collective concern as individuals are not expected to deal with their emotions on their own but rather to share them with the people who are around them.



Each type of *massana* performance produces a specific set of emotions that are key to the performance's success. *Dgoku* performances give to its performers a feeling of confidence, of great power as well as a feeling of achievement. *Dāmba*'s performances (see chapter 4) are very clownish, and give a feeling of casualness and fun while inducing a lot of laughter. *Edjengi* performances makes the female performers feel afraid and go about with a constant feeling of danger, as well as an intense feeling of delight and pleasure (see chapter 4). *Massana* activities are designed to bring out positive emotions. Even though *massana* performances can go wrong, sometimes even ending up in fights, the set of emotions associated with *massana* activities are always positive: joy (*esengi*) and beauty (*eniε*).

When people got ready to go to a funeral commemoration in Sendébumu (*matānga*) where *Edjengi* was going to be held, the positive emotions associated to *Edjengi*'s performance were already present<sup>29</sup>. The anticipation of the event brought out people's positive emotions. Women gathered in groups of friends, and made themselves beautiful while laughing and talking about how nice it would be to perform with so many people. Men also gathered in groups which went towards the event, calling out to each other on the way. Everyone was excited and I could only see bright smiles on people's faces. Before musicking, even before seeing *Edjengi*, people were already in a good mood, because *Edjengi*'s performance resonated with joy and beauty in people's minds.

Bundo and Finnegan both highlighted the importance of the 'feel-good factor' in Pygmies' musicking practices, and both described it as an indispensable element for a successful performance (Bundo 2001: 95 about the Baka of Cameroon; Finnegan 2013: 700 about the Aka of CAR). *Massana* performances are part of what Finnegan insightfully called the 'politics of joy' (Finnegan 2013: 700), as Rouget noted about the Aka of RoC that the pleasure felt by performers matters more than the musical product in people's mind (Rouget 2004: 35). Sawada described joyful moments in *obe* performances among the Efe of DRC, and said that "people are very emotional", and that "the adults often laugh heartily in each other's arms and frequently shout in a high-pitched voice out of joy" (Sawada 1990: 176-177). Performances among Pygmy populations have been described by anthropologists as 'moments of intense

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<sup>29</sup> The *matānga* ceremony in Sendébumu is described in chapter 6

plenitude and fulfillment' (Rouget 2004: 35), as 'special, sacred, timeless time' (Lewis 2013: 14), as moments of 'excitement' (Kisliuk 1998: 110), or as a 'special atmosphere' (Lewis 2002: 149). Performers are 'lost in the music' (*ibid.*), or 'totally absorbed in what they do', 'elsewhere' (Rouget 2004: 30). These descriptions show that musicking performances among Pygmies can become intense emotional experiences, and music and dance are the principal roads for the creation and sharing of highly valued collective emotions.

### **The collective body performing**

"Music in a community is basically non-discursive; it does not predicate or make arguments. While music may be seen as communicating very significant messages, the ways in which such meaningful work is accomplished are quite different from those involved in language-based notions of reference and usually depend heavily on the music's formal characteristics" (Brenneis 1987: 238).

Interdisciplinary research and advances both in neuroscience, archeology and genetics offer a whole new set of data, which appear to be particularly useful when studying Pygmies' musicking practices. The last twenty years have seen an increased interest in understanding the functional neuro-anatomy of music processing in humans (Levitin & Tirovolas 2009). It has been argued by several cognitive scientists that artistic thinking in general would have been essential to early human development (Cross 2001), and that music composition and improvisation can be seen as a preparatory activity for training cognitive flexibility (Levitin 2008). It is now known that music listening, performing, and composing engage regions throughout the brain, bilaterally, and in the cortex, neo- cortex, paleo-, and neocerebellum (Peretz & Zatorre 2003; Patel 2007; Sergent 1993).

Working from a different perspective, ethnomusicologists have shown that any musical act also bears various cultural meanings. Widdess showed through the analysis of the multi-layered nature of cultural meaning that "musical meaning is not necessarily referential or affective (though it may be both), nor is it necessarily a process of communication of messages from performer to listener: performance may also, or instead, be the articulation of a meaningful state, in which those present participate in varying ways and degrees" (Widdess 2012: 89). Musical

practices play a crucial role in the individuals' life as well as in the organization and reproduction of societies, as music plays a significant role in shaping into specific and distinct forms mature perception and cognition (Cross 2001). Cross-cultural psychologists have demonstrated that even basic aspects of perception are influenced by the way that experience is 'modeled' by a particular socio-cultural environment (Scribner & Cole 1973).

This section looks at the relations existing between music, dance and emotion, in order to highlight the collective emotions cultivated in the performative experience of *massana*. The analysis also explores the role of music and dance in the creation and sharing of collective emotions.

### **The effects of performing on the human body: music, dance and emotion**

Music and dance are both forms of non-verbal communication as their practice allows individuals to express themselves in various non-verbal ways. Cross argued that music and dance are part of every human's "communicative toolkit", which allows one to communicate with the world (Cross 2005). Among the Mbendjele these activities are also tools for establishing and maintaining social relationships (Lewis 2009: 236), which is especially significant in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). Since emotional management is one of the fundamental elements involved in the construction of social relationships, dance can be considered as a medium for creating exceptional bodily experiences. In her study of ballet dancers Wulff showed that dance is potentially powerful as it is "capable of engendering memorable experience among dancers" (Wulff 2006: 126). Dance, through the particularly strong emotions it reveals, can create strong social bounds and a feeling of unity within a group of dancers, in a way that only shared bodily experiences can achieve.

The dancer's body can be analysed in relation to its emotional experience such as pleasure, pain or power. Blacking gave an interesting example of the impact of intense emotional experiences on individuals through his analysis of *domba*, a Venda girls' three-part initiation cycle. In the first part, the girls are confronted with painful body movements, while the final part of the initiation is pleasurable.

Interestingly, the Venda girls were more concerned with and remembered better the painful dance movement than the symbolic significance of it:

“Woman who had forgotten most of what they might have learnt about the associated symbolism had not forgotten the experience of dancing: they talked of problems of coordinating movements and bodies, the closeness of other’s bodies, the excitement when the dance went well, the transcendence of altered time schedules and the sense of transformation from the physical to the social body that was experienced through contrasting movement styles.” (Blacking 1985b: 86-87).

Hence what provokes and guides the emotional process of a spirit performance is a combination of different elements. Bonini Baraldi wrote that “... the function of music is not simply to trigger emotions, but rather its multiple effects pose a real scientific question that has to be addressed by means of performance analysis at a socio cultural level” (Bonini Baraldi 2009: 260). Humans being multisensory, emotions are brought thanks to an interweaving of different elements which, when combined, trigger all senses at the same time. The multisensory experience lived by the individuals during a musical and dance performance has been noted by several scholars. In Cavicchi’s study of Springsteen’s fans, the sensation of a multisensory experience is clear for participants:

“It gets you into it physically, because you’re dancing, you’re moving around, you’re moving your arms, you’re clapping your hands. You get into it mentally because you know the lyrics or you’re listening to them again, maybe you’re getting another meaning out of them, a new meaning or an old meaning, whatever. It’s just such an energizing experience, it’s a spiritual experience. So it gets you, mind, body, and soul” (Cavicchi 1998: 95).

I could have had the same discourse, though talking about *Dgoku* performances, in which women touch each other and sing together, dancing and moving around in a single movement. In the context of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), performers sing, dance, play the drums, create specific visual aesthetics, and interact with each other in verbal and non-verbal ways. It is the combination of all the elements (music, dance, etc.) that creates the optimal conditions for the sharing of profound emotional experiences. Lyon pointed out that social processes are not only understood through ideas and habits, but also through the body (Lyon 1995: 254). The physical action of singing and dancing turns the performer’s body into an emotional producer and receptacle, open to all kinds of feelings. The fact that performers share a variety of body movements leads to “the construction of a

collective affect” (Mossi re 2007: 118), as performers share collective emotions. According to Csordas, “embodiment as a paradigm or methodological orientation requires that the body be understood as the existential ground of culture – not as an object that is ‘good to think’, but as a subject that is ‘necessary to be’” (Csordas 1993: 135). My analysis of *massana* performances is therefore grounded in the various dimensions of embodiment processes as I look at visual and auditive aesthetics (forest spirit clothing, women’s clothing dance movements and music), non-verbal communication (dance as a means to communicate messages), modes of cooperation and the sharing of collective emotions.

### **Musicking and emotions in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*)**

When analysing *massana* performances, I take the body as the central point of individuals’ perception and understanding of what they are doing. I consider, after Hanna, that dance is composed of “purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal body movements, other than ordinary motor activities, the motion having inherent and aesthetic values” (Hanna 1979: 19). Hanna reminded us that

“dance is *psychological*, involving cognitive and emotional experiences affected by and affecting an individual’s personal and group life. Thus dance serves as a means of knowing and coping with socially induced tensions and aggressive feelings” (*ibid.*: 4, original emphasis).

Emotions are intrinsically linked to aesthetics in musicking performances. Some ethnographic vignettes will illustrate how, during *massana* performances, people are aware of each other’s state of mind and constantly try to make people ‘feel’ better in order to achieve collective joy and pleasure.

During some forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) such as *Dgoku*, the tension created between men and women can be palpable, and individuals seem to come across various emotions. Yet through singing and dancing, these tensions are at the same time exaggerated and resolved when brought to a paroxysm. In *Dgoku* performances, women take over the community’s space and go around the village or camp singing and dancing. I explore *Dgoku* performances in detail in chapter 5, but I

present here a moment which illustrates how *Dgoku* performances (like other *mokondi massana*) play with the tension between men and women:

The spirit came to his house and pretended to steal something from inside, dancing around the man's plot and creating a mess. He shouted from behind his house, half-hidden, asking the spirit to go away. Women laughed at him, seeing that he was afraid to come closer. This man was obviously very upset by *Dgoku*'s performance and yet did not dare to come and physically evict the spirit from his plot. Despite his demands, the spirit ignored him and kept dancing in his plot until it decided to go further on.

The emotional atmosphere can be very intense in such moments of a performance. In this example, the man has to deal with an internal tension: the desire to kick the women out of his plot, and the fear to offend the spirit. The women (and men) experience the immense power women have when dancing *Dgoku*. This mixes with the excitement of the performance and the exhaustion of the singing and dancing. "Dance is a physical instrument or symbol for feeling and/or thought and is sometimes a more effective medium than verbal language in revealing needs and desires or masking true intent" (Hanna 1979: 4). Emotions felt by individuals are in fact collective, as women share a specific set of emotions while men share another: excitement, joy and profound feeling of power on one hand; irritation, fear, annoyance and feeling of helplessness on the other hand.

*Dgoku* songs' lyrics amplify emotions among both men and women, as they can be very explicit and mock the masculine gender. Songs such as "the penis get cut", "young man, fuck me" (*masa tuba me*), or "where is the penis?" (*eloko vai?*) can be quite offensive to men when loudly sung by a group of young and older women, running around the village, even while the women enjoy the sexual innuendo. When Mongemba, an old man, was asked by Jerome Lewis what he felt when he heard the women insult him like this, he answered that he did not like it, at all. But what could he do? He had to let women do their thing. But when they will be done, the men would takeover, and perform *Edjengi*.

The presence of intense emotions thus seems to be an important contributor to a performance's success, since in order to create a good forest spirit performance

(*mokondi massana*), women and men have to cooperate and get on well with each other; otherwise the performance will stop or at best be of poor quality. When people are performing well, a performance can last all night and give people a feeling of beautiful joy (*esεηgo eniε*). Further ethnographic examples describing some of the various ways Mbendjele promote and share cooperative behaviors demonstrate that positive emotions are a necessary ground for the success of a performance.

During one *Edjεηgi* ritual (Bonguinda, January 2014), a woman used a comical trick to improve the general atmosphere. She came towards a drum player and grabbed both his hands. She then pretended to play the drums energetically using the player's hands, saying "play, play!" (*pia, pia!*)<sup>30</sup>. All the drummers laughed a lot at her move, especially her victim. Then she went back to the group of women, leaving the drummers laughing. After a few minutes the drummer stopped and spoke to the women. He told them not to stay back, and to come forward to dance with the *Edjεηgi* spirit. He was also trying his best to improve the performance.

Sometime later, during a *Bolobe* ritual (Bonguinda, March 2014), a woman asked the teenage girls to sing more loudly to carry a song. Then another woman asked two girls to sing a long *esime* (section of a song) because she felt that it was a good time for the *Bolobe* spirits to show off their dancing<sup>31</sup>. Later on, a man came to the women and encouraged them to sing in order to keep a song going and to make them clap hands. Sometimes, a single word or a short sentence can motivate everybody and get the song going. Here are a few examples:

<i>Oka!</i>	"Listen!"
<i>Kaba buse esime!</i>	"Give us an <i>esime</i> [type of song]!"
<i>εmba ke!</i>	"Won't you sing?"
<i>Pia mabo!</i>	"Clap your hands!"
<i>Bina na lηηgisi</i> [lingala]!	"Dance with energy!"
<i>Kia!</i>	"Do it!"
<i>C'est bon</i> [French]!	"Looking good!"
<i>Wera! Wera!</i>	[interjection]
<i>Moto</i> [lingala] <i>a courage</i> [French]!	"What an enthusiastic person!"

Mimicry is also a way Mbendjele use to create laughter and positive emotions. During a women *Diāηga* dance in Bonguinda (February 2014), a man approached

<sup>30</sup> In Mbendjele society, drums are –apart from rare exceptions- always played by men.

<sup>31</sup> I describe the *esime* type of singing and its role in performances in chapter 3.

two women dancing, and aped their dance movements in a very comic way before going away laughing, and leaving the women laughing behind him.

### **Concluding remarks**

I hope to have shown in this chapter the importance of good sounds and positive emotions for the achievement of the right emotional atmosphere during *massana*. The constant encouragement to play allows the community as a whole to benefit from the laughter and good humour. Games are closely followed; children are trained through playful activities to become skilled musicians and dancers, and they are taught to build the performance of *massana* through cultivating appropriate emotions among participants using mimicry and comedy in addition to beautifully executing the typical dance or song styles of that particular performance.

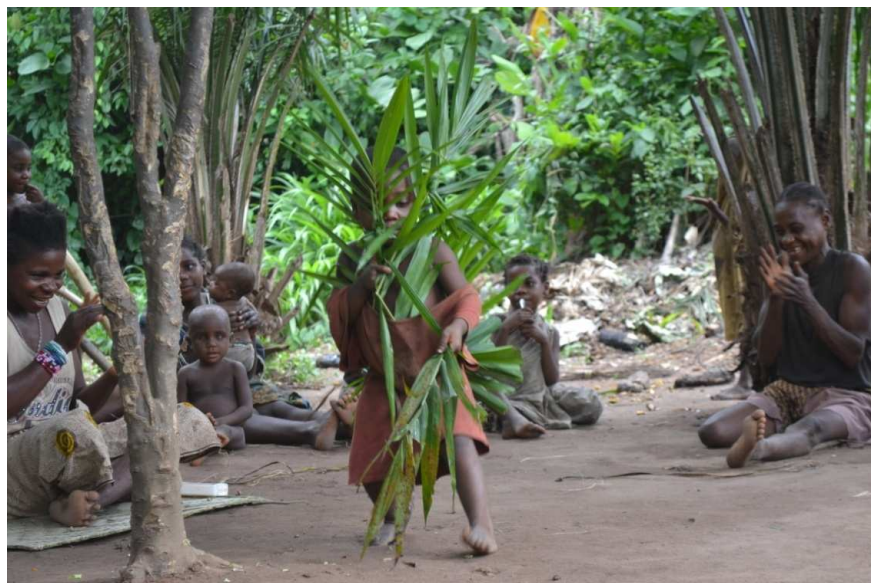
The valued connection between collective emotions and performance suggested by the ethnographic vignettes of this chapter illustrate how people focus on collective emotions during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). According to Parkin, “it seems unavoidable that dramatic effect will necessarily include emotional arousal. The question is how much and under what socio-cultural conditions” (Parkin & al 1996: xxii). In the context of *massana* performances, ‘dramatic’ aesthetic effects lead to collective ‘emotional arousal’. The use of music and dance for the purpose of collectively sharing valued emotions leads me to look at the aesthetics of sharing as they are displayed and embodied during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). The next chapter will focus on elucidating some musical features of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) and will describe the underlying musical structure in which performers evolve.



**Plate 1:** Embe is encouraged to dance by her mother while her father plays the musical bow (*game*)



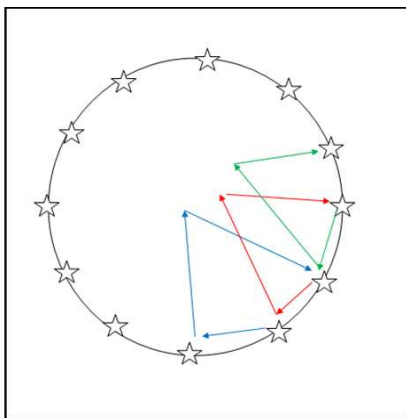
**Figure 6:** Loma (four-years-old)'s *Mopepe* spirit dances:



**Figure 7:** Tokabe and Mondomba doing *edyānguma* while Thomas and Kumu's spirits are dancing



**Figure 8:** Staging of *anasi*



**Legend:**

Each star represents a girl.

→ Direction of dance steps.

**Figure 9:** Girls playing *anasi*





**Figure 12:** Girls playing *epatipati*



**Figure 14:** Girls playing *esule*



**Figure 15:** children playing *moona kema*



**Plate 2:** Children playing *babubu*

Step 1: Children are in their “boat” and travel on water



Step 2: Children simulate the arrival of a venomous insect



## Chapter 3:

### The egalitarian musician

The internal structure of Mbendjele's music

#### **Introduction: Mbendjele music in the Pygmy context**

Mbendjele music is very similar to the music of other Aka groups described by ethnomusicologists (e.g. Kisliuk 1998; Arom & Dehoux 1978; Fūrniiss 1999, 2006). Fūrniiss noted that in BaYaka egalitarian societies “there are no professional musicians”, as “nobody earns his/her living from music making” (Fūrniiss 2006: 5). Chapter 2 described how Mbendjele children are conditioned throughout childhood to participate to *massana* games and performances, and to consider music in a ‘professional’ way, since the practice of music is necessary to their survival. In some sense members of an egalitarian BaYaka group are professional musicians, in the way they see themselves as ‘living off’ music.

In addition to a common way of structuring and performing music, Pygmy populations share a common musical style, characterized by the singing without words, the yodel technique, vocal polyphony, the use of short-lived instruments, a specific voice tone and common rhythmic formulae (Arom & Dehoux 1978). Among these typically BaYaka musical traits, polyphonic singing is the most emblematic, and Fūrniiss noted that “the contrapuntal repertoire is the musical trait that distinguishes Aka music from their neighbours' music” (Fūrniiss 2006: 5).

The musical aesthetics of Mbendjele's *massana* performances are grounded in strict rules internalized by performers and rarely explicitly expressed. In this chapter, I uncover some of the intrinsic rules and principles of Mbendjele music, as I explore rhythm, singing and the use of melodic instruments. The surprising resilience of Pygmy's music suggested by the comparison of Pygmy music recordings still needs additional data to be clearly understood. Arom, Fourniss and Kisliuk provided valuable data on the music of the Aka of CAR, but very little ethnomusicological research has been conducted among the Aka groups of northern RoC. Thomas & Bahuchet (1986) paved the way for comparative approaches in the field of Pygmy studies and proved that such approaches can highlight fundamental Pygmy cultural traits, music being one of the most emblematic. I thus provide in this chapter a detailed analysis of Mbendjele's musical structures, in the hope that it will provide fertile ground for further ethnomusicological comparative research. Indeed, ethnomusicology is "among the disciplines that provide answers to the question of whether there is a valid reason to group different societies under the exogenous and homogeneous label 'Pygmy'" (Fourniss 2014: 210).

I do not however provide here an exhaustive analysis of Mbendjele's musical system. Instead I focus on a number of specific musical features which are, to my mind, necessary to the understanding of the dynamics of forest spirit performance (*mokondi massana*). As this thesis aims at exploring the mechanisms of egalitarian practices through the holistic analysis of *massana* performances, and considering the value BaYaka attribute to music and dance (see chapter 1), an analysis of performance in a Pygmy context can hardly neglect the study of musical internal structures. Chapter 4 and 5 present performative aspects of *mokondi massana*, but first the strict musical rules and principles underlying performances are presented in order to facilitate interpreting performers' actions and reactions. The musical analysis of key elements of Mbendjele music provided in this chapter describes the musical foundations of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*).

I first look at rhythm, and make an inventory of the rhythm instruments used by the Mbendjele. I then show how rhythms are constructed in terms of metric and periodicity, and describe Mbendjele rhythms' essential patterns and modes of variation. I also look at the use of tempo and question its variability in time. In the following section I move on to an analysis of singing in the context of forest spirit

performances (*mokondi massana*). I show that songs and performances are constructed around the alternation of two types of singing, *eboka* and *esime*. I emphasise the way they relate to each other and provide a detailed analysis of both types. Finally I look at the use of four melodic instruments: the flute *lifulele*, the musical bow *game*, the harp *mondume*, and the harp-sitar *mongadi*, to emphasise the role of casual music playing in everyday life.

## Rhythm

Among Aka Pygmies, the name of a repertoire (e.g. *Bolobe*) also designates the songs and the rhythmic formula associated with this repertoire, as well as the spirit in the case of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), or the game in the case of children's *massana*. Or as Fűrniiss puts it, "the generic name of a dance refers to this formula as well as to the specific choreography and the song repertoire that goes with it" (Fűrniiss 2006: 4).

There is no word for a 'rhythmic formula' in Mbendjee as people talk about 'the way they play the drums' (*ndenge ba pia ndumu*) to describe specific rhythms associated to a repertoire. Here I use Joiris and Fűrniiss's terminology to avoid confusion. The term 'rhythm' designates an individual rhythm while the term 'polyrhythmic formula' or 'formula' designates a combination of two or more rhythms (Joiris & Fűrniiss 2010: 2).

In this section I identify key parameters of Mbendjele rhythm. I first describe the various instruments and items used to play rhythms. I then look at the rhythm itself and describe the way it is organised before identifying two modes of rhythmical variation: improvisation and change of accentuated notes.

### Rhythm instruments

In any circumstance involving dance, the Mbendjele use cylindrical wooden drums which the Mbendjele manufacture and possess themselves (see figure 17), but they also appreciate *bilo*-manufactured cylindrical drums, usually bigger. In both cases,

the drums have a single membrane, made of an animal's skin (usually a type of antelope or duiker).

This type of drum is widely spread in Central Africa, among Pygmy and *bilo* populations (Rivière 1999). The Mbendjele play the wooden drums vertically or lying on the ground, like the Bongo of Gabon (De Ruyter 2003), the Aka, the Baka (Bahuchet & Färniss 1995) and the Bagyéli of Cameroon (Oloa-Biloa 2011: 22).

This wooden cylindrical drum is called '*ndumu*' in Mbendjee, although a '*ndumu*' can be any object which makes an appropriate sound i.e. similar to the wooden cylindrical drum's sound. Empty water containers, because of their omnipresence in villages and of the quality of their sound often make appreciated *ndumu*. The Mbendjele therefore use any available jerry can, barrel, or plastic container<sup>32</sup>, transformed into a *ndumu* for the time of a performance. Containers and wooden cylindrical drums are often used simultaneously when cylindrical drums are lacking.

The log drum used by the Mbendjele is also a wide spread rhythm instrument in the Congo Basin as its use has been observed among the Aka, Bongo, Bagyéli and Baka Pygmies as well as among the Mpyemo and Kaka *bilo*<sup>33</sup>. The generic name of the log drum in Mbendjee is *ekbwakata* (see figure 18). The *ndumu* and the *ekbwakata* are the principal instruments used for rhythm.

In addition to the drums essential to the rhythmical pattern, the Mbendjele use various objects to create additional individual rhythms and enrich the orchestra such as glass bottles, pots, plates or machetes. The use of clinked machetes is common among Pygmy populations of the Congo Basin (Färniss 2012: 122). For instance, *Ekāmbaleki* performances require two drums (*ndumu a ngoye* and *mokombe*) but *Ekāmbaleki* sometimes clink his machetes together and creates an additional rhythmical part (see figure 41).

The name of rhythm instruments changes according to the repertoire. Färniss showed that among Aka and Baka populations, rhythm instruments are not named according to a material object but according to the part the instrument plays in the orchestra (Färniss 2012: 120-121). These names also vary from one area to the

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<sup>32</sup> The Mbendjele call any 'plastic container' a '*bidon*', a French word meaning 'can'.

<sup>33</sup> For descriptions of the use of the log drums among these populations, see Arom 1991b: 27; Bahuchet 1992; De Ruyter 2003; Färniss 2012: 121; Bahuchet & Färniss 1995; Oloa-Biloa 2011: 23.



other. *Bolobe* performances in Bonguinda's area require two drums: *ndumu a ngoye* and *mokombe*. According to Paul Mikounou (an Mbendjele living in Pokola), for the *Bolobe* spirit performances of Pokola Mbendjele call the first drum *ndumu a ngoye* as well, but it is played by a woman with a stick instead of being played by a man, and the second drum is called *mokinda* instead of *mokombe*.

In *Edjengi* performances, three drums are necessary to create the *Edjengi* rhythmic formula: *mokidikidi* (played with a stick), *enbomba*, and *ekbwakata*, the log drum played with sticks. The same log drum used in the context of performances linked to funerals is called *njāndb*. *Ekbwakata* can be replaced by a *ndumu* (wooden drum or plastic container), in which case it is called *ndumu a ngoye*, and is played with a stick (see figure 19).

The role of rhythm instruments in Mbendjele performances is to provide a regular matrix for the singers and the dancers. It follows that in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), the rhythm instruments are placed according to the needs of the singers. In *Bolobe* performances, the women lead the songs. Men also sing but women produce the core of the singing and they control the choice of songs. Rhythmic instruments are therefore placed close to women, so that the drum players can communicate easily with the women and respond quickly to their needs (see plate 3). Drums also divide the space according to gender.

In some *Edjengi* performances, it is the men who choose the songs. Women sing at least as much, but in some cases men control the choice of song. Rhythm instruments are consequently in the men's space, again so that the drum players can answer the singer's needs efficiently (see plate 4). In addition, drums mark the gendered space as the drums provide a safe place for uninitiated.

The rhythm instruments are not approached by the Mbendjele as material objects but as musical parts in a polyrhythmic ensemble, as the attribution of instruments' names demonstrates. For example, any plastic container, wooden drum or else is called "*mokombe*" if it plays *mokombe*'s rhythmic part. Each instrument plays an individual rhythm which is combined to other individual rhythms to create polyrhythmic formulae. The next section details the patterns according to which the musicians play their instruments.

## Rhythmic structure

In this section I analyse the processing of time in Mbendjele music by looking at time-frames and rhythmic organisation. I explore the rhythmic structure of Mbendjele music and investigate the construction of variations from essential rhythmic patterns by providing examples from various repertoires of men and women forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). An analysis of the variation of tempi during a performance will show how drum players adapt their tempi to singers and dancers.

### Metrics and periodicity

Mbendjele music is metered, meaning that all durations are strictly proportional. Every repertoire has a specific formula which underlies all the songs of a same repertoire. These rhythmic formulae are repetitive and continuous, showing a rigorous periodicity. Nonetheless, each formula is slightly different from the others, as the musical system is based on the constant renewal of variations constructed around essential patterns.

Mbendjele music is not structured according to a reference matrix based on the regular alternation of an accentuated sound with one or several non-accentuated sounds (as in western music). Instead, every beat is considered to have the same accentuation (Arom 2007: 285). That's why in the following transcriptions, I chose not to use the western bar, and to transcribe the period of the rhythmic formula or song instead.

Following Arom, the beat is “an isochronous standard constituting the cultural reference for measuring time” (Arom 2007: 287, my translation from French). In the Aka and Baka musical systems, the beat is often materialized by hand clapping and is usually divided in three minimal values: 1 • • 2 • • 3 • • 4 • • (Joiris & Färniss 2010: 3). The beat can also be divided in two minimal values (Färniss 2012: 128), making a binary rhythm (1 • 2 • 3 • 4 •) like is some Mbendjele speech-style songs. Songs in Mbendjele music usually unfold over a periodicity of 4 beats or its multiples, 8, 12 or 16 beats, like several other BaYaka populations such as the Baka of Cameroon

(Joiris & Fűriss 2010: 3), the Bagyéli of Cameroon (Oloa-Biloa 2011:43) and the Aka of CAR (Arom 2007: 328).

### Essential patterns

In every repertoire, each rhythm instrument (one or more) has its own individual rhythm. When there are several instruments, their rhythms are combined to create polyrhythmic formulae. As Pygmy music is grounded on the fundamental principle of cyclic repetition with slight variations (Arom 2007: 286), musicians execute successively multiple variations created from the same essential pattern. Pygmy rhythm is therefore based on essential rhythmical patterns and ranges of variations of these essential patterns.

In some repertoires, the rhythmic formula is composed of a single rhythm on a short cycle of two or four beats with little variation. It is the case of the *Dgoku* formula (see figure 5.1) and of the girls' game *anasi*, in which the rhythm is only materialised by hand clapping and is composed of a single clap on a cycle of four beats (see figure 5.2). In the *Dāmba* repertoire, the rhythmic formula is also composed of a single individual rhythm played by the log drum *ekbwakata* (see figure 5.3).

Arom showed that most of the Central African rhythms are organized in diagonal, meaning that a polyrhythmic formula is constructed from the combination of two or more individual rhythms which do not begin their cycle simultaneously (Arom 2007: 289). *Bolobe* performances require a minimum of two drums: *ndumu* a *Dgoye* and *mokombe*. Each drum repeats its cycle indefinitely, each time with slight variations. The two drums do not begin their cycle at the same moment, and their cycles are of different length (see figure 20).

**Plate 5:** Formulae composed of an individual rhythm

<b>Beat</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>2</b>	
<b>drum</b>	x	x		x

Figure 5.1: *Dgoku* rhythmic formula

<b>Beat</b>	<b>1</b>			<b>2</b>			<b>3</b>			<b>4</b>		
<b>Hand clap</b>	x											

Figure 5.2: *Anasi* rhythm

<b>Beat</b>	<b>1</b>			<b>2</b>			<b>3</b>			<b>4</b>		
<b>Ekbwakata</b>	x		x		x	x	x		x		x	x

Figure 5.3: *Damba* rhythmic formula

<b>Beat</b>	<b>1</b>			<b>2</b>			<b>3</b>			<b>4</b>		
<b>Ndumu a Dgoye</b>	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
<b>Mokombe</b>	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x		x

<b>Beginning</b>	
<b>Length</b>	

Figure 20: *Bolobe* polyrhythmic formula<sup>34</sup>

### Modes of variation

The figure 20 shows the minimal essential pattern of the *Bolobe* polyrhythmic formula, but the players slightly vary each of the successive versions of their respective cycles since they constantly adapt to the actions of the singers, players, dancers or spirits performing. Drum players have different ways of making variations. They can improvise a new individual rhythm whose cycle might be longer than the others. They can also change the accentuation by playing the same rhythm but accentuating different beats.

<sup>34</sup> For the methods of transcription of Pygmy music, I was inspired by Arom's work (e.g. 2007: 289), as well as by Färniss's (e.g. 1999: 152).

In *Bolobe* performances, the player of *ndumu a Ngoye* can thus change the accentuated notes to make variations around the same pattern. By doing so, the player offers the dancers a range of dancing steps with accentuations on and off the beat (see figure 21).

#### Variation 1:

Beat	1			2			3			4		
Ndumu a Ngoye	<u>X</u>	x	x	<u>X</u>	x		<u>X</u>	x		<u>X</u>	x	

#### Variation 2:

Beat	1			2			3			4		
Ndumu a Ngoye	x	x	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	x		x	<u>X</u>		x	<u>X</u>	

#### Variation 3:

Beat	1			2			3			4		
Ndumu a Ngoye	x	<u>X</u>	x	x	<u>X</u>		x	<u>X</u>		x	<u>X</u>	

**Figure 21:** Variations through change in accentuated notes (*Bolobe* formula)

#### Legend:

X: accentuated note

x: un-accentuated note

Some drum parts are more subject to improvisation than others. In *Edjengi* performances, the drum *mokidikidi* often departs from its pattern to improvise. In *mokidikidi*'s variations, the accentuation is often off the beat and do not follow the minimal essential pattern of *Edjengi* polyrhythmic formula (see figures 22 and 23). During forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), drum players often take turns to play, and each musician brings his own style and preferred set of variations.

Beat	1			2			3			4		
Mokidikidi		x	x	x		x	x				x	
Enbomba	x		x	x	x		x		x	x		
Ekbwakata	x		x	x		x	x		x	x		x

**Figure 22:** Edjengi rhythmic formula

Beat	1			2			3			4		
Mokidikidi		x			x		x			x		

**Figure 23:** Variation of *mokidikidi* in the *Edjengi* formula

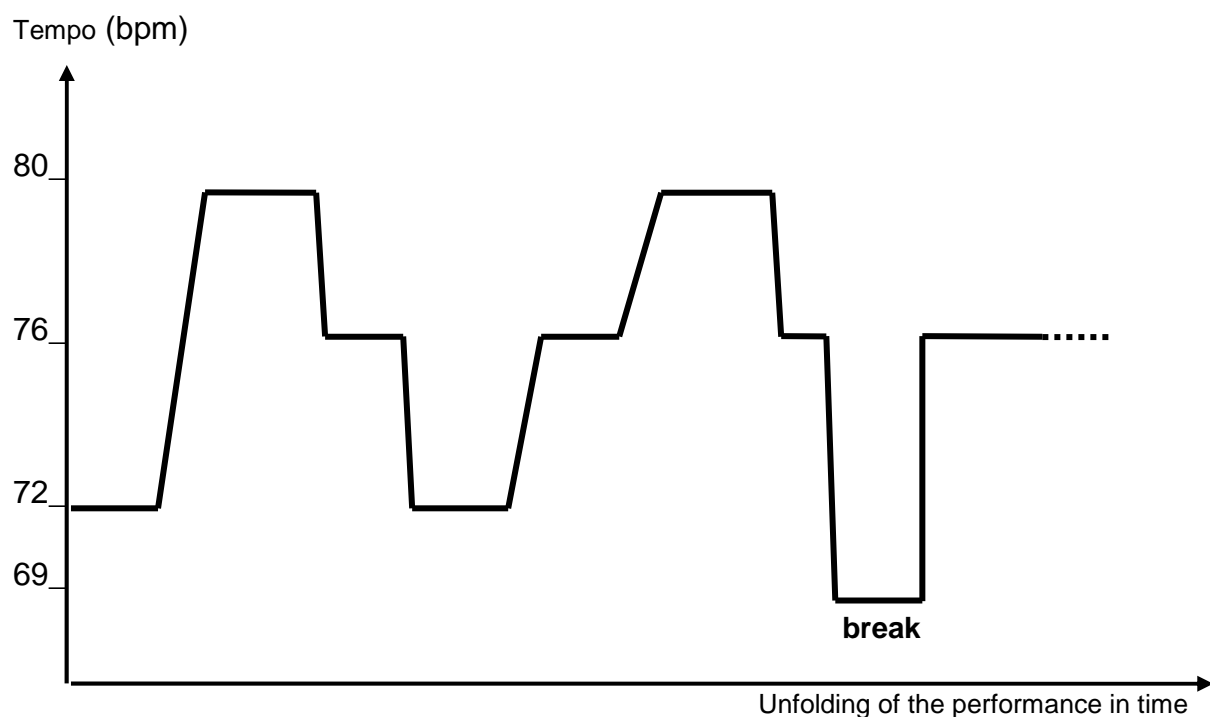
### Tempo

In central African music, rhythms are organized around a stable and regular movement, without *accelerando*, *rallentando* or *rubato* (Arom 2007: 286). I

nevertheless noticed that in Mbendjele music, the beat often accelerates or slows down, according to the emotional state of successive moments during a performance. If rhythms are stable and regular, Mbendjele performances do contain *accelerandi* and *rallentendi* on the long term i.e. between successive songs within the same performance.

During forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), songs are executed one after the other, and the order usually does not matter as performers chose the songs they like best. The songs executed at the beginning of a performance usually begin slowly (e.g. around 72bpm) and as the song develops the beat gets faster, up to around 80bpm. After an energetic moment in a performance, performers often have a break and take a few minutes to rest. After the break, songs tend to begin on a relatively slow beat (around 69bpm), that will accelerate again as soon as the song becomes energetic.

Tempi therefore change during a performance as they accelerate and slow down in waves. The figure 24 illustrates the movement of tempi with an example from an *Edjengi* performance. As the performance unfolds, the tempo changes according to the succession of songs and energy put by participants into the dance and the singing.



**Figure 24:** Abstract of an Edjengi performance's tempi (Bonguinda, January 2014)

Drum players adapt their tempi to the performers' emotional state and present needs as singers and dancers as I will develop shortly. The tempo also changes according to the type of singing, as each type of singing is composed of distinct techniques and formal structures. The next section investigates the technical needs which condition tempi and the drum players' choice of variations.

### Singing

The Mbendjele language is a tone language, as are the majority of African languages. According to Hyman, "a tone language is one in which an indication of pitch enters into the lexical realization of at least one morpheme" (Hyman 2006), meaning that the pitch of the syllables has a relevant lexical or grammatical significance (Cloarec-Heiss & Thomas 1978). Färniss showed that "the consequence of this linguistic constraint on singing is that the melodies have to follow roughly the tonal scheme of the language if the words are to be understood by a listener" (Färniss 2006: 11). In contrapuntal polyphony, the melodies move in different directions, which prevents the use of words simultaneously by several singers. In most Mbendjele songs, the lyrics are composed of a few words, pronounced here and there by singers during the song while the melodic lines are sung on meaningless syllables.

Each participant is free to sing any part he likes, and to change parts during the same song. This organisation is egalitarian in its conception, as individuals are free to participate or not, and to participate as they like "by choosing the parts and variants that correspond the best to their voices" (Färniss 2006: 12). Performative roles are established, but individuals choose how to fill these roles. Among these roles are the drummers (chosen among men), and the *djamba* which corresponds to the Aka of CAR's *konzà wà lémbô*, translated as "song leader" (Bahuchet 1995: 60; Rouget 2004: 30), or "the women who are specialists of singing forwards" (Joiris 1997-98:62). Arom described this role as follows:

« Son rôle consiste à entonner le chant et à l'animer, à le "relever" lorsqu'il faiblit, à lancer le chant suivant et, dans certaines circonstances, à le faire cesser: il est 'celui qui anime' » (Arom 1987 [1978] : 3)<sup>35</sup>.

This definition corresponds what I observed among the Mbendjele as the individuals who fill the role of the *djamba* are good “ambianceurs” in the Congolese sense of the term. A good *djamba* excels at instilling energy into participants, and at giving relevant suggestions of songs for people to take over. The *djamba* under no circumstances ‘leads’ in the sense of having a superior hierarchical position, but rather demonstrates a great persuasive power and ability to convince people to get involved in a performance. Usually, performers playing the role of the *djamba* are active only for a short period of time, to “boost” the performance’s energy. Once he/she is not needed anymore, the *djamba* usually no longer fulfil its role and becomes a singer or dancer or drummer or whatever part he/she enjoys doing. Several individuals can thus fulfil the role of the *djamba* during a single performance.

If individuals are free to change roles and vocal parts spontaneously, they do so with a rigorous respect of the melodic lines’ essential patterns. In this section I analyse the internal structure of the two types of Mbendjele singing: *eboka* and *esime*. The description of the musical structure of singing gives explanations for individuals’ actions and reactions during performances, and shows the criteria according to which the performance unfolds.

### **Structure of songs in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*)**

In Mbendjele performances that involve dance, the music is structured around the alternation of two types of singing: *eboka* and *esime*. *Eboka* could be translated as “polyphonic song” since in *eboka*, up to four melodic parts can be combined to create a song. An *esime* is a section of a song, in which usually only one or two women sing a response to a soloist while the others only clap hands. As a

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<sup>35</sup> Could be translated by « His role consists in striking up a song and filling it with life, as he has to “lift it up” when it weakens, to strike up the next song and, in particular circumstances, to end it. He is ‘the one who fills the singing with life’ »



performance unfolds, *eboka* and *esime* alternate according to various parameters which will be described in this section.

### *Esime and eboka*

Fürniss showed that Aka melodies are based on a pentatonic scale, although while the scale of the Aka of CAR's melodies is anhemitonic, the scale of Mbendjele's melodies is hemitonic, meaning that the scale contains semitone intervals. BaYaka music does not operate with absolute pitch, as musicians "are more concerned with correct relationships between parts than they are with a rigid idea of interval sizes, and these may vary even within a single performance" (Fürniss 2006: 12).

*Esime* and *eboka* are two different categories of singing clearly distinguished from each other by Mbendjele and by other Aka groups (Kisliuk 1998: 41). I suspect a wide distribution of the category *esime* or its equivalent throughout BaYaka populations of the Western Congo Basin. I observed *esime* sections among the Bagyéli of Cameroon, the Mbendjele of Bonguinda's area as well as among southern Mbendjele of RoC, and Kisliuk described *esime* sections she observed among the Aka of CAR (Kisliuk 1998). But the *esime* sections systematically and mysteriously disappear from recordings of Pygmy music<sup>36</sup>, as ethnomusicologists "edited out this percussive section, presenting only the polyphonic singing" (*ibid.*: 41). Arom and Fürniss, in their extensive study of Aka Pygmies' singing did not mention *esime* sections to my knowledge, and focused instead on polyphonic singing (*eboka* sections).

Kisliuk nonetheless figured that *esime* are important sections of any dance performance among the Aka of CAR. She defines *esime* as a "percussive interlude" (Kisliuk 1998: 9), or as "cross-rhythmic calls, claps and exclamations that enlivened the dance beat", as a "get-down section" (*ibid.*: 41), or as "percussive melodies ... which can serve as a transition between songs" (*ibid.*: 55). She provides two transcriptions of melodic responsorial *esime* (*ibid.*: 56; 93) and emphasised at several occasions the importance of *esime* sections to intensify the dance and the performance as a whole. She noted that "virtually all BaAka *beboka* [dance event] that use drums have some type of *esime*" (*ibid.*: 41).

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<sup>36</sup> E.g. Arom 1973; 1987[1978], Arom & Renaud 1977; Fürniss 1998, Sallée 1989.

During a dance event among the Aka (CAR), Kisliuk described how “the rhythmic intensity of the *esime* took over” and created “a laughing overflow of energy” (*ibid.*: 41). Kisliuk’s observations echo my experience of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) among the Mbendjele in which *esime* sections are essential to the intensification of dancing.

### The atmosphere of *eboka* and *esime* sections

During the *esime* of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), the spirits and/or the women can keep dancing. Neither beat nor rhythm change during the alternation of *eboka* and *esime*, and it is only when the drums stop or when people are tired that the song ends. The length of *eboka* and *esime* can vary. Often, when the singing goes well, *eboka* can last longer than *esime*. Other times, when the soloist(s) manage to last or when the dancers request it, an *esime* section can last up to half an hour. The *esime* sections allow women to rest their voices and to concentrate on the dancing, while *eboka* sections allow them to rest their bodies and to concentrate on the singing.

*Eboka* and *esime* sections, while being part of the same performance, create different atmospheres and feelings. *Eboka* sections enchant all the beings hearing its music, while *esime* sections enchant the performers and instils in them the necessary energy to achieve tremendous dancing. Both styles of singing are indispensable and highly condition the quality of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) through changes in the performer’s focus.

During a good *eboka* section of a song, performers can feel like they drift away from reality as they enter a “euphoric trance-like state” (Lewis 2002: 163). In this state, the auditory senses are amplified and people are very attentive to all the sounds emanating from the performance. People will for instance pay a close attention to the spirit’s sounds which often depend on the spirits’ clothing and dance movements. People say that “*Edjengi*’s leaves make the right noise” (*libongu akia tɔkɔ*) to point out that they can *hear* that the spirit’s dance movements are proper and that its clothing is well made. When one focuses on the ‘music’ of an *eboka* section in a forest spirit performance (*mokondi massana*), which includes polyphonic singing, polyrhythm, hand clapping, sounds of feet beating the ground, sounds of the friction

of leaves, women's skirts and spirit's clothing, the intensity of auditory inputs tends to dissociate performers from reality and to minimize the use of other senses.

I had this feeling in many occasions, as my sense of self and reality were blurred, and I felt like entering another space not anymore connected to reality. This feeling can be intensified when a performance happens at night, with little or no lighting. Each time I had this feeling, the *esime* sections brought me back to reality and forced me to pay attention to the people around me not only with my ears, but also with my eyes and sense of touch. *Esime* sections keep people together as the connection between performers are not auditory as in the *eboka* but visual and physical.

*Esime* sections sort of bring back people to the reality of the performance since they make them concentrate on the dancing and react to each other's bodies as they dance together. *Esime* sections instil energy into the performance as performers can rest from the singing and can dance and watch each other dance, creating physical connections between performers. In that sense, the immateriality of *eboka*'s music is balanced during performances by the percussive nature of *esime* sections, deliberately deployed to facilitate and encourage bodies to dance.

### **The percussive interlude *esime***

The succession of sung notes in *esime* is usually fast, with little time for breathing in between, which makes singing of *esime* a tough exercise. *Esime* are usually done by teenage girls (approximately between 7 and 18 years old), who appear to be the best at singing loudly and clearly at a fast pace, controlling their breath and keeping up with the song for long minutes. At the end of an *esime* section, soloists are usually out of breath and give themselves a few moments to rest their voices and catch their breath before they can start singing again. This shows how physically demanding and exhausting the *esime* type of singing is.

The quality of an *esime* thus depends on the soloists, and they have to keep everything going on their own. It is a very difficult type of singing, very demanding and exhausting, as the soloists have to sing very loudly to be heard above the drumming and hand clapping. Further, the dancers rely on *esime* sections to get

opportunities to show off and to raise the energy of a performance. *Esime* singers perform an important function to establish a percussive space for virtuoso dancing that play a key role in the enjoyment of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*).

### Insertion of *esime* in songs

*Esime* could be considered (as Kisliuk did) as “interludes”, as they make transitions between the *eboka* sections. The following diagram (figure 25) shows four examples of how *esime* are inserted between the *eboka* sections of a song in *Bolobe* performances (Bonguinda’s area).

A song always begins with an *eboka*, but can end on an *eboka* or an *esime*. In figure 25, the ‘beginning of a song’ corresponds to a moment in the performance when a new song is introduced, or a song which is different from the song that precedes it. The ‘end of the song’ means that afterwards a different song begins or people have a break.

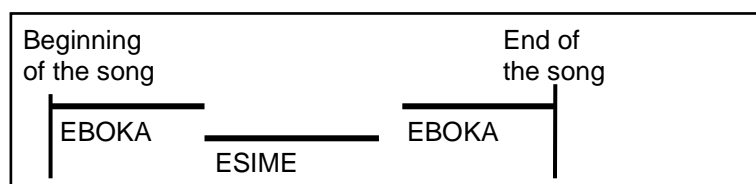
*Esime* are associated with specific repertoires (e.g. *Bolobe*, or *Ngoku*) and not individual songs since the same *esime* can be used in all the songs of its repertoire. The figure 25 only shows four examples of how a song can be composed in *Bolobe* performances, but many more combinations are possible as *eboka* and *esime* sections alternate in a different manner in each repertoire.

The figure 25 shows the most common succession of *eboka* and *esime* in the *Bolobe* performances I witnessed and highlights the internal structure of songs during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). In the first example, the song is composed of a polyphonic *eboka* section interrupted at one moment by an *esime* section.

In the second example, the *esime* section is composed of several *esime* one after the other. Often, the men ask the women for more *esime* because they feel like dancing more. Women themselves ask for more *esime* when they want to dance or rest their voices. A woman will for example call out the teenage girls and say: “give us an *esime* so that I can dance *edyānguma* [a women’s dance movement]” (*beke*

*buse esime ame kia edyāṅguma*). In the example 2, the *esime* went well and people kept the song going by singing an additional *eboka* section.

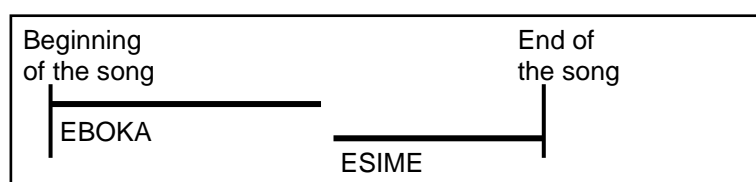
**Example1:**



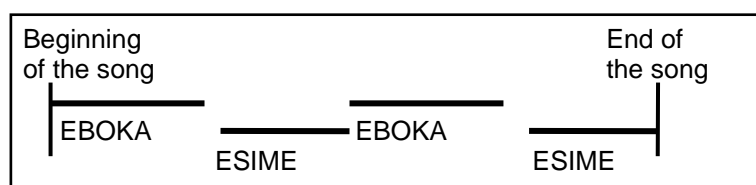
**Example 2:**



**Example 3:**



**Example 4:**



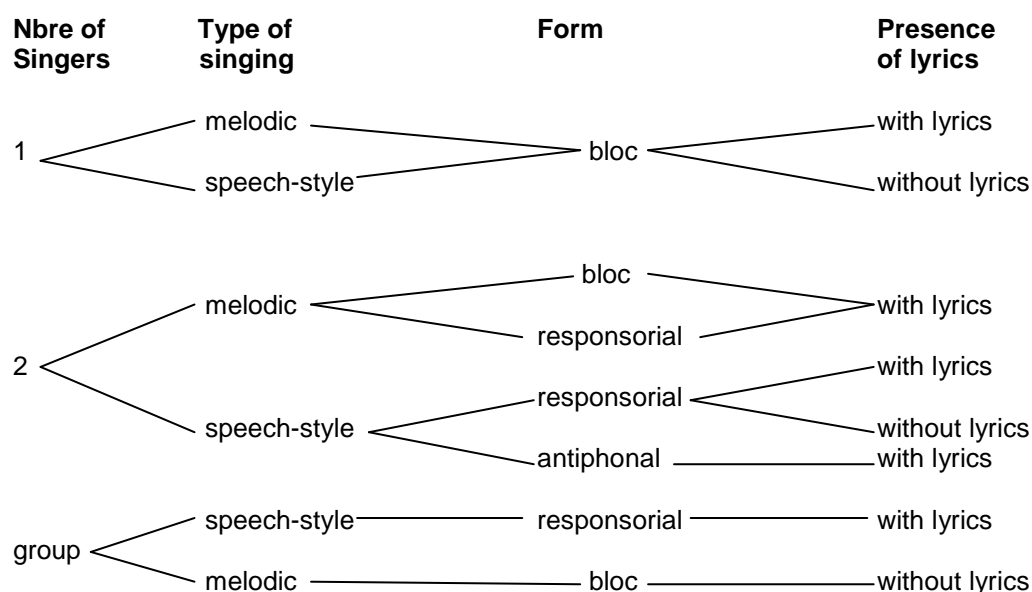
**Figure 25:** Four examples of the alternation between *eboka* and *esime* sections during a song in Bolobe performances

At other instances (like in the example 3), the song ends on the *esime*. In the example 4, the song is very efficient and people enjoy it very much, so they keep the song going as they alternate between *eboka* and *esime* sections for a long moment (up to one hour).

If *esime* can be inserted between *eboka* sections in various ways, they can also appear in various shapes. I will now identify the constitutive parameters of *esime* and show how they are constructed.

## Internal structure of *esime*

Because of the neglect in the existing literature of the internal structure of *esime*, I present here my observations among the Mbendjele. The diagram below (figure 26) gathers the constitutive parameters of *esime* songs. An *esime* can be done by one, two, or a group of singers. A melodic *esime* is sung in head voice and on high pitch notes, mouth turned towards the sky to open the throat as much as possible and project the voice above the performance's sounds. Speech-style *esime* are more percussive. In speech-style singing one does not sing notes but speaks rhythmically, using voice effects to enrich the song and create different pitch. Speech-style *esime* are also sung in head voice to project the voice as much as possible.



**Figure 26:** combinatorics of *esime*

I observed three forms of *esime* in Bonguinda's area: bloc, responsorial or antiphonal. The form 'bloc' means that the vocal parts are simultaneous as the singers sing at the same time. In the responsorial form, "the soloist sings a series of phrases that the choir punctuates with a response" (Arom 1991b: 18). In the antiphonal form, "there is regular alternation between the two parts: each phrase, having been announced by the soloist, is immediately repeated note-for-note" (*ibid.*). *Esime* can contain words or be sung with meaningless syllables.

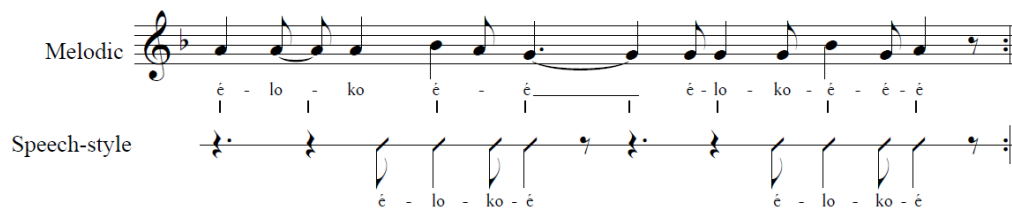
### Types of *esime* (melodic and speech-style)

Among the Mbendjele I observed two types of *esime*: melodic and speech-style. Some *esime* are intrinsically conceptualised as melodic and cannot be transformed into speech-style versions (see figure 6.1). The *esime* “*eloko*” however can be melodic or speech-style as shown in figure 6.2. Melodic *esime* of a form bloc can be executed by two singers. The two singing parts evolve in parallel with an interval of a Major third or fifth. In the *esime* “*Olebila*” (meaning unknown), the two singers sing simultaneously with a strict parallelism, conditioned by the use of words (see figure 6.3). I also observed a melodic *esime* executed by all participants. It consists in a single note held endlessly (see figure 6.4).

**Plate 6:** four examples of melodic *esime*



**Figure 6.1:** Melodic *esime* for one singer, no lyrics (*Bolobe* repertoire)



**Figure 6.2:** Melodic and speech-style versions of the *esime* “*eloko*” (the thing) from the *Bolobe* repertoire



**Figure 6.3:** Melodic *esime* “*Olebila*” (*Bolobe* repertoire)

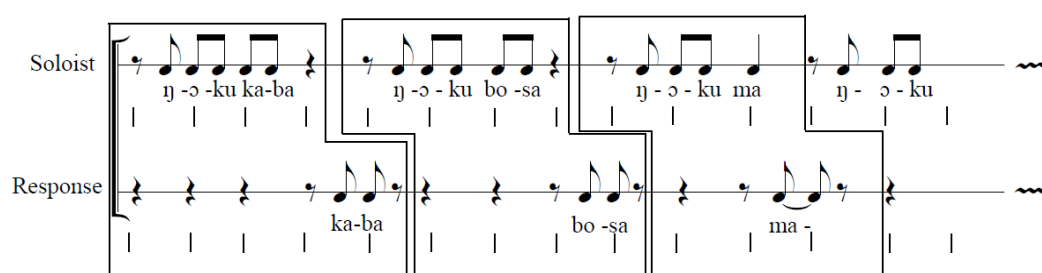


**Figure 6.4:** Melodic *esime* (no lyrics) from the *Edjengi* repertoire

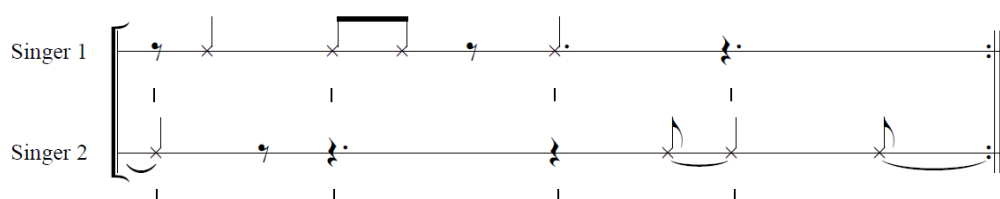
Speech-style *esime* could be defined as ‘percussive singing’, because vocal parts behave like drums, making short notes on one or two pitches only. In the *esime* “*Dgɔku bosa*” (see figure 7.1), a set of phrases is available to the soloist (*Dgɔku kaba/ Dgɔku bosa/ Dgɔku ma*), who puts them in the order she chooses.

Speech-style *esime* are usually executed at a fast tempo, and drummers adapt to the needs of the singers as they speed up the tempo (also intensifying the dancing possibilities and part of how the *esime* section intensifies dancing) when such *esime* are done. When the singers are two or more, speech-style *esime* can be responsorial (see figure 7.2) or antiphonal (figure 7.3). When a speech-style *esime* contains lyrics, singers usually vary the lyrics as they use different words for each cycle. For instance in the *esime* from the *Bolobe* repertoire “*oki mundɛlɛ*” (did you hear me, white person?), the singer 1 can replace “*o oka yāŋgɔ*” (did you hear that over there?) by a second “*oki mundɛlɛ*”, or use other words that will be rigorously repeated by the singer 2 (see figure 7.3).

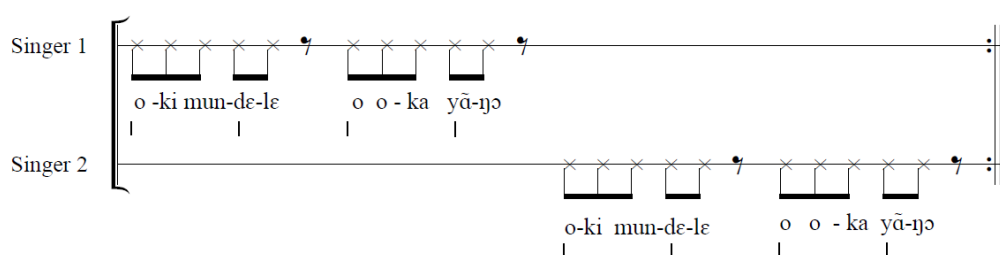
#### Plate 7: speech-style *esime*



**Figure 7.1:** speech-style responsorial *esime* “*Dgɔku kaba, Dgɔku bosa, Dgɔku ma*” (*Dgɔku* gives, *Dgɔku* takes, *Dgɔku* gives (lingala), from the *Dgɔku* repertoire



**Figure 7.2:** speech-style *esime* for 2 singers, no lyrics (*Bolobe* repertoire)



**Figure 7.3:** speech-style antiphonal *esime* for 2 singers, no lyrics (*Bolobe* repertoire)



## The constitutive parts of *eboka* songs

While *esime* singing usually involve one or two singers, *eboka* sections involve all participants. Fűrniiss's extensive ethnomusicological analyses exposed the structural principles of Aka's polyphonic and contrapuntal singing. Fűrniiss showed that:

"Melodic and rhythmic variation is one of the main concerns of good Aka musicians and there is virtually no limit to the number of contrapuntal lines that can be interwoven. Thus, with the increasing number of participants, the polyphonic texture gets richer and leads to a more and more complex musical expression" (Fűrniiss 2006: 5).

The contrapuntal lines become more and more complex as an *eboka* song unfolds, but the essential melodic pattern of the song is always present in the singers' minds. The essential melodic pattern of a song consists of "a minimal and non-varied version of the part, determined by the presence of certain scale tones that are systematically located in specific positions of the cycle" (Fűrniiss 2006: 10). Singers navigate freely between the parts and realize slightly different variations in each cycle.

I adopt in this section a comparative approach, and present the structural pattern of several Mbendjele songs from Bongiunda's area using the analytic principles of Fűrniiss's analysis of the Aka Pygmies of CAR. The polyphonic singing of the Aka of CAR and of the Mbendjele of RoC are very similar, despite some differences that will be highlighted shortly. I will first identify the constituent parts of Mbendjele vocal polyphony (*eboka*) and show how the vocal parts relate to each other through the identification of the ways by which individuals produce variations.

### *Dgoye, osese and yei*

Arom showed that in Aka counterpoint, each vocal part is named and has distinctive features (Arom 1994). He identified four constituent parts in Aka polyphony: the *mòtángòlè*, literally "the one who counts", the *ngúé wà lémbò*, literally "the mother of the song", the *òsêsê*, literally "below", and the *dìyèì*, literally "yodel" (Fűrniiss 2006: 11). Among the Mbendjele, only three of these four parts are named: *Dgoye, osese*

and *yeyi*. If the vocal parts are named, the names are rarely used in everyday life for teaching purposes or during performances. Arom emphasised that

“Aka hardly ever refer to the parts and their patterns explicitly. Indeed, they are immanent concepts that are never taught to the musicians as such. Many singers don't know them and learn about the parts only when there are too many errors in the performance” (Arom 1994:148).

The parts are rarely made explicit through verbalisation although musicians have the parts in mind when performing. I conducted several interviews (mostly with women) about the vocal parts in polyphonic singing, and gathered the following structure to which women refer mentally when they sing.

The *Ngoye* (the mother) while having the same name is not equivalent to the Aka of CAR's *ngué wà lémbò*, which is a male bass part. The *Ngoye* is the principal voice with which a song can be identified, and can be sung by men and/or women. The *Ngoye* can potentially be divided in two parts, which begin in the same way but diverge at one point (see figure 27 and 28).



**Figure 27:** Eboka song “*Boling*” (love), *Bolobe* repertoire



**Figure 28:** Eboka song “*ebola*” (the abandoned woman), *Bolobe* repertoire



**Figure 29:** Eboka song “Esa na mbongo” ( the rich man), *Bolobe* repertoire

Among the Aka of CAR, the *òsésé* part means ‘below’ in the sense of “inferior in hierarchy to the *mòtángòlè*” (Fürrniss 2006: 11). Among the Mbendjele, the *osese* part means ‘below’ in the sense of bass line. Like the *Ngoye*, the *osese* can be divided in two (see figure 29), and is characterized by little rhythmic and melodic movement.

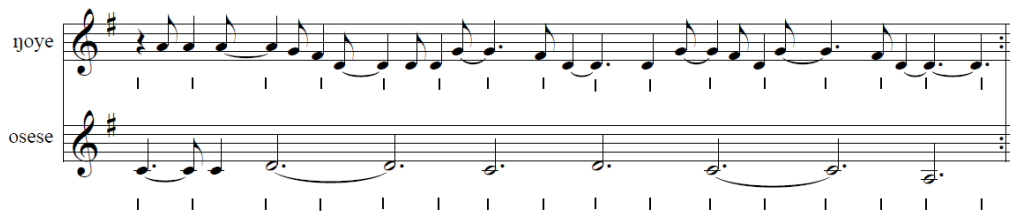
The *yei* is equivalent to the Aka of CAR’s *diyèí* as it is a yodel part, “sung above all the other parts by women” (*ibid.*). The yodel technique consists in the alternation between chest voice and head voice as illustrated in figures 27 and 29<sup>37</sup>.

#### How the parts relate to each other

All the three vocal parts (*Ngoye*, *osese* and *yei*) are not necessarily present at all times during a song. As people make variations, they tend to drive away from the essential minimum pattern. *Ngoye* and *osese* are structural parts, while *yei* is a complementary part which is not necessary to the identification of a song. *Yei* nevertheless improves the quality of a song, especially when several *yei* parts are sung simultaneously.

Most of the songs have only two constituent parts (*Ngoye* and *osese*). In *Edjengi* songs, while there is not necessarily a *yei* (see figure 30), singers multiply the variations of the *Ngoye* and the *osese* parts.

<sup>37</sup> See appendix 2 n°15.



**Figure 30:** *Eboka* song “*euye*” (the lie), *Edjengi* repertoire



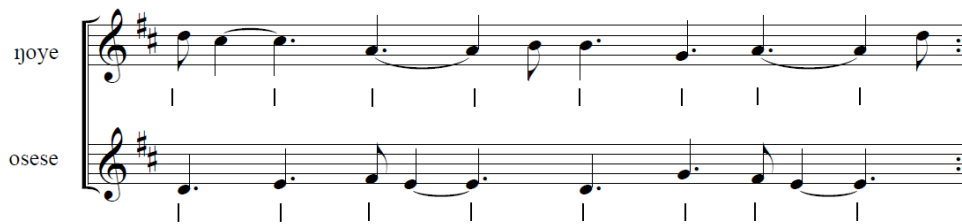
**Figure 31:** *Eboka* song (no lyrics), *Ngoku* repertoire

The *Ngoye* and *osese* parts can sometimes meet as they follow the same melodic line at an octave interval, as illustrated in figure 31, and the same song can appear to be very different at separate moments. As singers drive away from the parts as the song goes on, the essential patterns of the parts as transcribed above with which the song begins disappear and give way to the variations developed by each singer.

The more singers, the more versions of the parts are created, and the more complex the song becomes. Nonetheless, the essential melodic patterns of each part are always present in the singers’ minds, and their variations will always stick to the part they have in mind while improvising. As I learnt to sing with the women and tried to make variations myself, I discovered that the variation process depends on the part one chooses to modify. Variations from the first part or from the second will not give the same results.

In addition to their own repertoire, the Mbendjele often borrow melodies from neighbouring *bilo* communities, as the song “*to bina* [Mbendjele and Lingala]” (let’s dance). The *bilo* origin can be identified by the use of a Major scale (instead of a pentatonic scale characteristic of Pygmy music), and by the words in Lingala. Despite the *bilo* origin of the song, Mbendjele have appropriated it and added a part (*osese*) to the original melodic line (*Ngoye*). This song was very popular in

Bonguinda at the time of my stay, and people sung “*to bina*” at almost every *Edjengi* performance (see figure 32).



**Figure 32:** *Eboka* song “*to bina*” (let us dance in Mbendjele and lingala), *Edjengi* repertoire

The *massana* performances involving rhythm instruments and polyphonic singing are the most emblematic forms of Mbendjele music, although, like many other Pygmy groups, they also use melodic instruments in more intimate contexts. To complement the focus on forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), the following section describes the use of melodic instruments in Mbendjele communities.

### Melodic instruments

Among Central African Pygmies, there are relatively few melodic instruments (Fürniss 2014: 187). This scarcity led scholars to assume that the melodic instruments used by Pygmies had been borrowed from *bilo* populations (Fürniss 2012: 116). Bahuchet nevertheless showed that melodic instruments are an integral part of the Pygmy culture as he inventoried musical bows, harps, harp-zithers, flutes and whistles among the Aka and Baka populations (Bahuchet 1992; Bahuchet & Fürniss 1995). These melodic instruments, characteristic of the Pygmy culture, are manufactured and played by the Mbendjele. I observed in Bonguinda’s area the use of four melodic instruments: a one-stringed musical bow (*game*), a bamboo flute (*lifulele*), a three-stringed harp-zither (*mongadi*) and an eight-stringed harp (*mondume*). Unlike the Aka of CAR and the Baka of Cameroon who use these instruments in ritual contexts (*ibid.*), the Mbendjele instead play only for entertainment.

## **The musical bow *game***

Game is a short-lived instrument, as its materials are not made to last. It is constituted of a flexible wood stick, hold in semi-circle by a liana string. Two small sticks are used to make notes by striking the string. The player's mouth is used as a resonator, and by moving his lips the player changes the instrument's notes. The musical bow is an emblematic musical instrument of the Pygmy culture. It has been observed among the Mbuti of the DRC and the Baka of Cameroon (Dehoux & Guillaume 1995) as well as among the Aka of the CAR (Fürniss 2012: 118), although among some populations the instrument is only played by women, it is played by men among the Mbendjele.

The musical bow *game* is enjoyed by young men when they are staying in a forest camp (see figure 33). Young men play this instrument when relaxing during the day, or to animate peaceful evenings. This instrument is also used to encourage young children (one- to three-years-old) to practice dancing. At this stage, no specific movement is expected from the children, but they are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the music. As long as they move in dance-like movements, parents seem to be satisfied. Children can be motivated by hand clapping, to give them a sense of rhythm, and the *game* melodies are a good way to introduce them to the concept of *massana*<sup>38</sup>.

## **The bamboo flute *lifulele***

*Lifulele* is a short-lived bamboo flute with two holes, usually played by young men, even if women sometimes play as well (see plate 8). This instrument is used to entertain men, for instance during long trips in the forest, when they have to walk a long distance. The men take turns playing the flute as they try and look for new melodies while walking.

*Lifulele* can be compared to the *mobeke* whistle of the Aka of CAR (Fürniss & Bahuchet 1995) and to the Cameroonian so-called 'Pygmy flute' (Arnaud & al 2006: 45). These instruments are all known for the use of a technique which creates a

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<sup>38</sup> See appendix 2 n°19.

symbiosis between voice and instrument. The Pygmy flutes and whistles can only produce a small amount of notes, and the musicians therefore complement with notes sung to create melodies:

“In order to obtain real melodies from this rudimentary instrument, the musician regularly alternates the sound produced by the whistle with other sounds sung in a falsetto voice: so fused are the voice and instrument that the listener finds it extremely hard to distinguish between them” (Arom 1991b: 17).

The figure 34 shows a melody invented by Mbio. He introduced tiny variations each time he played the melody since, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, slight variations are typical of Pygmy music. The singing technique is transcribed by a distinction between the note heads (plain for the notes produced by the instrument and thin for the notes produced by the player’s voice)<sup>39</sup>.



**Figure 34:** Melody played on the flute *lifulele* (forest camp Makana, November 2013)

### The harp *mondume* and the harp-zither *mongadi*

I observed the harp *mondume* in Bobanda (the Mbendjele neighbourhood of the *bilo* village Djoubé), where the instrument is used during the performances of the forest spirit *Dāmba*<sup>40</sup> (see figure 35). The harp *mondume* is also used to accompany traditional story-telling (*gano*). Like all the other melodic instruments, the harp *mondume* is played by men for entertainment, and each individual chooses to learn to play and/or manufacture the instrument if he pleases<sup>41</sup>.

The harp-zither *mongadi*, in Bangui-Motaba, is played in the evenings to accompany playful dances (see figure 36). This instrument is widely spread in Central Africa, the most known harp-zither being the *mvet* of the Bulu-Béli-Fang populations (Fürrniss 2012: 117). The shape and the craftsmanship of the Mbendjele’s instrument is very similar to the Aka of CAR’s (*ibid.*). Because this instrument was not used in Bonguinda where I conducted my fieldwork, I know very little about the use of this

<sup>39</sup> See appendix 2 n°18.

<sup>40</sup> A description of *Dāmba* spirit performances is provided in the following chapter.

<sup>41</sup> See appendix 2 n°17.

instrument. It nonetheless seemed important to mention its presence among the Mbendjele, since it has been shown to be a significant musical instrument in other Pygmy cultures (Joiris 1997/98).

### **Concluding remarks**

Mbendjele music contains all the characteristics of a 'Pygmy style'. Arom provided multiple descriptions of Pygmy music, such as the following which beautifully describes the impression left on the listener:

"This music is collective and everyone participates; there is no apparent hierarchy in the distribution of parts; each person seems to enjoy complete liberty; the voices swell out in all direction; solo lines alternate in the same piece without any pre-set order, while overall the piece remains in strict precision. It is this, perhaps, which is the most striking thing about this music ... a simultaneous dialectic between rigor and freedom, between musical framework and a margin with which individuals can manoeuvre" (translated by Kisliuk 1998: 3).

In this chapter, through the analysis of the internal structure of Mbendjele music, I emphasised the dynamics of the "dialectic between rigor and freedom", expressed in analytical terms as essential patterns and variations.

Several scholars already tackled the issue of explicating the implicit rules underlying music in a Pygmy context, although music has often been approached in isolation from other aspects of a performance. For instance, Arom's re-recording technique (Arom 2007: 217) was tremendously efficient in the understanding of the vocal parts of Pygmy singing. While this technique provides important information on the way people *sing*, it does not say so much about the way people *perform a song*. The analysis of the structure of songs constructed on the alternation between *eboka* and *esime* sections demonstrated that external parameters such as dance or collective emotions influence the internal structure of musical elements. The embodied experience of performers encompasses various elements which in part determine the way performers' make musical choices.



Fürniss wrote that “we know that as much as the grammar of a language is not literature, musical rules are not performance. In this sense, the demonstration of the basic concepts of Aka music theory does not tell us how music is experienced” (Fürniss 2006: 35). The following chapter focuses on other performative aspects which influence the music during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). Chapter 4 complements the present chapter by providing detailed ethnographic descriptions of how music is performed in an Mbendjele context.

**Figure 17:** Monoi brings back to its owner a *ndumu* used for a *Bolobe* performance (Bonguinda, February 2014)



**Figure 18:** the log drum *ekbwakata* during a *Dāmba* performance (Bobanda, June 2014)





**Plate 3:** The place of drum players in *Bolobe* performances

**Figure 3.1:** Bonguinda, December 2013



**Figure 3.2:** Bonguinda, February 2014



**Figure 3.3:** Sendébumu, December 2013

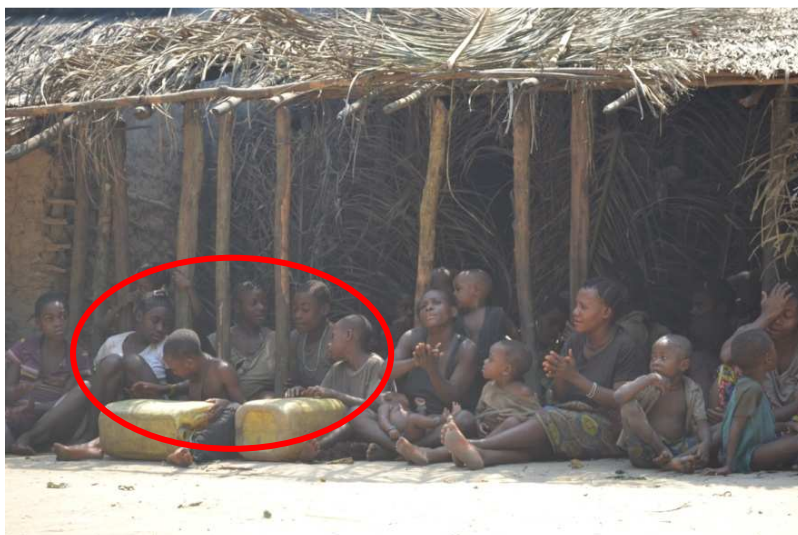




Plate 4: The place of drum players in *Edjengi* performances

**Figure 4.1:** Bonguinda, January 2014



**Figure 4.2:** Sendébumu, December 2013





**Figure 19:** Rhythm instruments during an *Edjengi* performance (Bonguinda, January 2014)



**Figure 33:** The musical bow game (*Makana*, November 2013)



**Plate 8:** The bamboo flute *lifulele* (Makana, November 2013)



**Figure 35:** The harp *mondume*





**Figure 36:** The harp-zither *mongadi* (Bangui-Motaba, April 2013)



## Chapter 4:

# The egalitarian performer

### Visual aesthetics in forest spirit performances

#### Introduction

Scholars have acknowledged the importance of music in Pygmy societies and highlighted the spiritual power it bears (e.g. Joiris & Färniss 2010). Although the auditive dimension is a core element of spirit performances, visual aesthetics are also considered by the Mbendjele to be crucial to a performance's quality. With the exception of Tsuru's work however, little is known of the grammar of spirits' clothing, appearance and dancing style in Pygmy societies.

Because most of the Mbendjele's aesthetic rules are non-verbal and rarely expressed, it is difficult to identify the aesthetic elements which play an active role in the process of accessing euphoric states of joy. Hüsken noted that "failed rituals direct our attention to 'what really matters' to the performers and participants and others in one way or another involved in a ritual" (Hüsken 2007: 337). In this chapter I look at several failed forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) in order to emphasise the importance of visual aesthetics and their relation to music in the dynamics of sharing.

I focus on the mechanisms through which visual aesthetics are elaborated, and emphasise their inherent role in people's capacity to share collective emotions. I first



look at the staging and unfolding of four men spirits' performances (*Dāmba*, *Ekāmbaleki*, *Bolobe* and *Edjengi*) and identify key musical and visual performative elements. I then move on to show how men spirits' clothing are elaborated and demonstrate that each spirit's clothing is unique and emerges from both men's and women's artistic manufacturing. I enquire into spirit's personalities, dance styles and appearances to stress the impact of spirit's individualities on the visual aesthetics of spirit performances. Finally, I turn my attention to myths and show how, despite the great diversity of *Edjengi* and *Dgɔku* performances, they are all grounded in a common ideology.

Like in any human society, Mbendjele performances are not fixed in time as people innovate and/or borrow elements from other populations. The descriptions I provide here refer to what I observed during fieldwork on the Motaba River. Because of the high frequency of innovation and change in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) in BaYaka societies, things are likely to change over time. I use the present tense in my descriptions only by means of convenience and for purposes of clarity.

### **Performative aspect of men' spirit performances**

In this first section, I explore the dynamics of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). I first look at two forest spirit performances, *Dāmba* and *Ekāmbaleki*, which I observed in one particular area (Djoubé). I then move on to more wide spread forest spirits, *Bolobe*, *Edjengi* and *Dgɔku*. Using ethnographic vignettes, I identify key performative characteristics of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) and interrogate the nature of the object collectively shared by performers.

#### ***Mokondi massana*: potential borrowings**

During my time in the RoC, I often visited the village of Djoubé, where I could buy groceries from the village's small shop (e.g. pasta, biscuits, rice, salt, sugar). Mbendjele from Bonguinda have relatives in the Mbendjele neighbourhood of Djoubé (Bobanda), and also entertain barter relationship with Bondongo *Bilo*. In Bobanda, I

participated in several forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) which were not practiced in Bonguinda, and which do not appear in the literature on BaYaka populations. The characteristics of two of the *mokondi massana* I observed are quite different from other wide spread *mokondi* such as *Edjengi* or *Bolobe* which will be described later on in this chapter. Several elements which I describe in this section might indicate that these two performances have a non-Pygmy origin, and have been adapted to fit Mbendjele's *mokondi massana* aesthetics. Unfortunately, I realized that these two performances were probably of a non-Pygmy origin while looking at my data after I left the RoC. I have not yet been able to ask my informants whether this is the case and my hypothesis is yet to be confirmed.

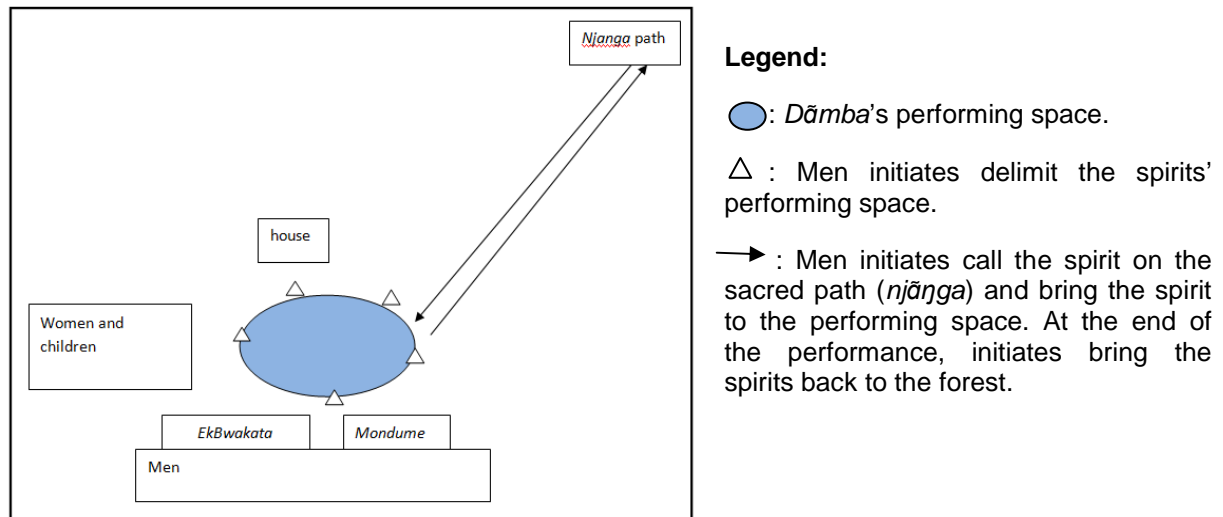
### Dāmba

Unlike most of Mbendjele men's spirits, *Dāmba* is not attracted to the camp by women's singing. Instead, it comes to perform among humans when men play the *mondume* harp, without any singing. This could be associated with the fact that *Dāmba* is a shy spirit, reluctant to show itself and afraid of loud noises, as before the spirits arrive, people do their best to keep the children quiet and tell each other to speak softly. To accompany the *mondume*, several men play the log drum *ekbwakata* and mark the pulsation with soft hand clapping<sup>42</sup>.

Women and children are present, though they do not dance or sing, and keep their voices down. Men gather behind the *mondume* player and keep quiet as well. To avoid frightening the spirit, everyone tries to keep silent at first. Yet, even though it is shy, *Dāmba* is a very funny spirit that can be compared to a clown-like character. Once it performs in front of the women and children surrounded by men initiates, it is not timid anymore and acts as if it were at home. Men, women and children participate in the performance by laughing and making comments on whatever the *Dāmba* spirits are doing, but they do not sing or dance. The *mondume* harp and the *ekbwakata* log drum are the only musical elements of *Dāmba* performances.

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<sup>42</sup> See appendix 2 n°5.



**Figure 37:** *Damba* performance's staging (Bobanda, June 2014)

*Damba* can come on its own, though its performance is much more efficient in terms of joy and laughter when it comes in family, i.e. with its two wives and child (see figure 38). When there are several spirits, the comical effects are multiplied, and the audience is very pleased to watch the spirits perform together. In *Damba's* performance staging, people are passive onlookers and are not required to sing, which make them particularly attentive. This staging thus offers *Damba* an appropriate context in which to develop stories, just like in theatre. I will discuss the use of the term 'theatre' in this context later on. What I emphasize here is that *Damba's* drama is made possible by the availability of people's attention (see figure 37).

In the *Damba* performances I participated in in Bobanda, *Damba* spirits perform scenes from everyday life. On one occasion, there were four *Damba* spirits: a masculine *Damba*, its two *Damba* wives and one of their *Damba* children. The audience saw *Damba* trying to have sex with one of the female *Damba* which refused its advances. The masculine *Damba* then went to the second female *Damba*. The latter left the child it was carrying with her co-wife (the other female *Damba*), to go and have sex with her husband (the masculine *Damba*). These scenes provoke much hilarity. Underlying the seemingly comical nature of *Damba* performances, important moral values are explored for participants.

During a *Dāmba* performance in June 2014, the scene depicted the problems that can arise in polygamous marriages (*mbānda*) and potential ways to solve them. The problems induced by polygamy are a recurrent theme in *massanasong lyrics* reflecting that Mbendjele consider polygamy a problematic arrangement that should be avoided (Lewis 2002: 74). For instance, the *Edjengi* song “Behind the marriage” (*sima libala*), the *Dgoku* song “Food is a complicated matter in polygamy” (*Yoma e mbānda mobe*) or in the *Bolobe* songs “The problem of polygamous marriage” (*likamboli* [lingala] *a mbānda*) and “Polygamy misleads people” (*mbānda akosa bato*) reflect this. In *Dāmba*’s performance however, an ideal polygamous relationship is depicted. As I will describe shortly, conflicts are quickly resolved without violence between the *Dāmba* spirits, and the scenes performed by the *Dāmba* spirits seem to offer advice on how to deal with the problems of polygamy.

Considering that polygamy is morally problematic in Mbendjele society<sup>43</sup>, it is striking that a well-run polygamous marriage is staged. This also suggests that this has been incorporated from outside as a forest spirit performance (*mokondi massana*). Since I witnessed this *Dāmba* performance in the Mbendjele neighbourhood of a Bondongo (*Bilo*) village, it could well be that *Dāmba* is an Mbendjele adaptation of a *Bilo* ritual, modified to fit *mokondi massana*’s rules and aesthetics. Further, the absence of singing is very unusual, as all the other classes of men *mokondi* spirits I know of (e.g. *Bolobe*, *Edjengi*) are seduced and attracted into human space by women’s singing. The topic covered by *Dāmba*’s performance, the absence of singing and the presence of a melodic instrument are three elements which suggest that the *Dāmba* ritual might have been borrowed to non-Pygmies neighbours, possibly the Bondongo.

In addition to polygamy, other issues are raised during *Dāmba*’s performances. For instance, the *Dāmba* child is taught how to dance by its *Dāmba* parents, as they stand around him and encourage him silently since *Dāmba* spirits are mute (unlike other spirits like *Bolobe* or *Matisangomba*). Adult *Dāmba* spirits surround the *Dāmba* child, and vividly nod their heads while watching the *Dāmba* child’s dance movement, sometimes holding its shoulders or showing it how to move around the

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<sup>43</sup> In chapter 6, I show how polygamy is strongly discouraged, as it is considered to ruin people’s *ekila*. I provide a detailed description of how two lovers were forced, through social pressure, to give up on their project to get married because the suitor already had a wife.

space (see figure 39). I emphasised in chapter 2 that, in Mbendjele society, children are constantly encouraged by adults to do *massana* and to improve their singing and dancing skills. The *Dāmba* spirits' conduct could be interpreted as the staging of an ideal situation in which parents teach their children how to perform *massana*.

*Dāmba* spirits also stage everyday activities, as female *Dāmba* mimic the action of cooking around the fire, or carry the *Dāmba* child around. At one point, the masculine *Dāmba* is asked by one of its *Dāmba* wives to carry the child while it is busy cooking. All of *Dāmba* spirits' actions are non-violent and harmonious, in the sense that as problems arise, a solution is found without talking, just by understanding the other's present needs. For instance, when the masculine *Dāmba* wants to have sex, one of the female *Dāmba* makes itself available. When one female *Dāmba* needs to cook, the masculine *Dāmba* takes care of the child, while the second female *Dāmba* fetches the fire-wood its co-wife needs. In *Dāmba* performances, bodies express themselves through action, without using verbal communication. Through dancing and performing actions, the spirits communicate various kinds of messages, both between themselves and to the audience. This collective non-verbal communication is made possible through a certain kind of aesthetics.

*Dāmba*'s body is covered with ashes, which makes it appear completely white. Its face is covered, whether by a black fabric, some leaves, or a wig (see figure 40). Apart from a small cloth or leaves to cover its crotch, *Dāmba* appears naked. *Dāmba*'s dance movements are characteristic, as it evolves knees turned inwards, making rotation movements of its pelvis. *Dāmba*'s physical appearance contributes to its comical aspect. Its appearance, but also its way of moving, induce laughter before the spirit even does anything. *Dāmba* makes jokes with his body, twisting its hips one side before suddenly turning the other way. As the performance unfolds, more and more laughter is induced by *Dāmba*'s behavior. Many women actually fall to the ground, defeated by their own hilarity, to giggle helplessly on the floor. Children can not stop giggling and sniggering.

*Dāmba* spirits put people in a very playful mood. After half an hour of *Dāmba* spirits' presence people started to play together, teenage girls played *anasi*, and men soon

imitated them, making their own *anasi* game<sup>44</sup>. The mechanisms used in *Dāmba* performances to induce laughter, fun and therefore collective positive emotions echoes the way the Mbendjele laugh and have fun in everyday life. People always keep a close track on what everyone is doing and mock inappropriate behaviours by mimicking the events and making fun of individuals involved in the events<sup>45</sup>. Humour is a defining aspect of *Dāmba* performances, as the staging and the spirit's behaviour allow participants to openly make fun of spirit's actions, since *Dāmba*'s everyday life actions are simultaneously closely observed and openly laughed at by the audience. The static staging allows people to be attentive, and as they are standing together they are able to share comments and laugh.

*Dāmba*, like other spirit plays, mixes the western concepts of drama, theatre and ritual into one performance. Also, *Dāmba* is managed by male initiates, and the secret aspects of the performance are unknown to neophytes. The purpose of *Dāmba* performances is to provoke laughter to entertain the audience. This is productive since the idea that the laughter (*mota*), nice music (*beboka eniε*) and joy (*esεngo*) underlying the performance ultimately open the forest, and enable people to find food easily.

Key aspects of *Dāmba*'s performance make it close to a western style theatre style of performance, where the women and children are only audience without contributing any music or dance. They are nonetheless integral to the performance since they make comments and laugh. *Dāmba* performances can be considered as 'rituals' just like all forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). Rappaport pointed out that those present at a ritual constitute a congregation whereas those present at a theatrical event are divided in two distinct categories of 'performers' and 'audiences'. As "certain participants are likely to become, at particular times during the ritual, objects of audience-like attention for other participants" (Rappaport 1999: 40), the fact that women and children do not perform and have a fixed audience-like position in *Dāmba* performance is not enough of a criterion to classify it as theatre. Because they produce 'good sounds' through their joyful comments and repeated

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<sup>44</sup> I describe *anasi* in chapter 3. See also appendix 2 n°10.

<sup>45</sup> The way women make fun of people's inappropriate actions is institutionalised and called *moadjo*, see appendix 2 n°14.

laughter, women and children are performers as the spirits and men playing the drums and *mondume* harp are.

The staging, the visual aesthetics of the mute spirits, the softness of the music played by the harp and the casual laughter create a particular atmosphere as *Dāmba* spirits tend to put people in a relaxed, playful and joyful mood. Despite its possible origin from outside, *Dāmba* illustrates the key quality of the encompassing aesthetics of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) that serve to share out valued emotional states among all those present using tried and tested, dependably repeatable techniques. From this point of view, spirit play can be regarded as a ritual mechanism through which people collectively share valued non-material social products, their emotions, humour, philosophy and affection. The next section explores the valued non-material social products which are shared during performances, and how they vary according to the spirit performing.

### *Ekāmbaleki*

*Ekāmbaleki* is considered by the Mbendjele of Djoubé to be one of the strongest forest spirits in Mbendjele cosmology. Some Mbendjele in Djoubé even told me that *Ekāmbaleki* is at least as strong as *Edjengi*, which puts it in the category of dangerous spirits, i.e. forest spirits that can harm and even kill people just by touching them. In Bonguinda, *Ekāmbaleki* is not performed, and *Edjengi* is the only spirit which is potentially deadly. Southern Mbendjele also consider *Edjengi* to be the most dangerous of all (Lewis 2002: 186) and do not perform *Ekāmbaleki* (Lewis, pers. com.).

Mbendjele of Djoubé told me that *Ekāmbaleki* is specifically used for net hunting. This can be seen in its appearance, as its head is covered by a hunting net (see figure 41). *Ekāmbaleki* is performed before and/or after a net hunting trip, to increase the hunters' luck during the trip and then to thank the spirit when the hunt has been successful. The staging of *Ekāmbaleki*'s performance echoes *Edjengi*'s, as the spirit goes freely around the village (in both Mbendjele and Bondongo neighbourhoods), while a few initiated men make sure it does not touch any woman or child. The dangerousness of the spirit is increased by the fact that it holds a machete in each

hand, and uses them to frighten women and children as it goes around. *Ekāmbaleki* is nonetheless a source of laughter, as it has a huge penis (see figure 42)<sup>46</sup>.

*Ekāmbaleki* performances require two drums played by men using their hands, *ndumu a ŋgoye* and *mokombe*, and no melodic instruments. *Ekāmbaleki* sometimes knock his machetes together to mark the pulse. Both men and women sing, and follow the spirit in its movements around the village, except for the drum players who remain static.

Contrary to other spirits like *Dāmba* or *Djoboko* which are performed in a specific location, often a relatively small and limited space, *Ekāmbaleki* is not limited in its movements and moves a lot, dancing all around the village. *Ekāmbaleki* particularly enjoys chasing the women and children, who run away as it approaches. Part of the fun for women and children is thus to get as close as possible to the spirit, while making sure they do not get too close (see figure 43). As soon as the spirit approaches, women would run away laughing before coming back again, dancing and singing towards the spirit. Mbendjele from Djoubé told me that, just like *Edjɛŋgi*, any woman or neophyte who touches *Ekāmbaleki* will die instantly. Women are therefore very attentive during *Ekāmbaleki*'s performances, and prefer to stand up to make sure that they can run away quickly if ever *Ekāmbaleki* approaches.

Songs in *Ekāmbaleki*'s performances are usually monophonic, as men and women sing a single melodic line together. The musical structure of *Ekāmbaleki*'s repertoire of songs is much simpler than other spirits' repertoires such as *Dgɔku* or *Bolobe*, in which three or four melodic parts are sung in counterpoint. This could be explained by the staging of *Ekāmbaleki*'s performances. Indeed, as the spirit dances in a vast space, women, men and children are scattered all around the village. It would thus be very difficult to improvise in counterpoint when each individual is away from the others, and cannot hear every singer properly. In *Edjɛŋgi*'s performances, women are standing close to each other, even touching sometimes, which allow them to be aware of their neighbours' melodic lines and they can improvise accordingly. This is not the case in *Ekāmbaleki*'s performances, which imply lots of erratic movements in a vast space. The *esime* sections are also quite straightforward as sung by all the performers in a responsorial form.

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<sup>46</sup> See appendix 2 n°6.



*Ekāmbaleki*'s affiliation to net hunting suggests the non-Pygmy origin of the performance. In the Mbendjele village of Sendébumu, people practice net hunt, although no forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) is associated to the practice. Instead, men use magical products to attract animals in the nets, in a way similar to the Bagyéli's of Cameroon (Oloa-Biloa 2011: 84). Further, the songs of *Ekāmbaleki*'s repertoire are simple, as they are monophonic. While this could be explained by the staging of *Ekāmbaleki*'s performance as I explained above, it could also be that *Ekāmbaleki* is of non-Pygmy origin, which could explain the great difference of musical structure between *Ekāmbaleki*'s songs and other spirit's.

Lewis described some of Mbendjele's "predatory techniques based on mimicry and deception to get things from villagers" (Lewis 2008: 236). *Bilo* words are easily incorporated in Mbendjee language, and people imitate birds, duikers and other animals sounds because "Mbendjee seeks to communicate, at least in theory, with the whole word" (*ibid.*). Mbendjele's predatory approach to language is also manifest with songs and rituals. Elders often encourage young men to travel and seek new forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) to purchase in order to increase the opportunities for joy and beautiful music in the community. *Dāmba* and *Ekāmbaleki* performances might thus be a *Bilo* performative style incorporated into part of the Mbendjele corpus so that people could experience the joy and laughter that these performances bring. The probable adaptation of *Bilo* performances highlights the social value and emphasis put by the Mbendjele on the importance of getting hold of new musical and ritual genres. The Mbendjele predated these non-Mbendjele performances and adapted them to an Mbendjele aesthetic in order to ensure the proper sharing of the valued non-material social products acquired (humour, joy and beauty).

*Dāmba* and *Ekāmbaleki* performances strongly distinguish themselves from other forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). The staging and structural elements of the music suggest a non-Pygmy origin despite Mbendjele aesthetics. The Mbendjele adaptation of these rituals therefore highlights what needs to be there to become *mokondi massana*. Despite unusual features such as the absence of singing or monodic singing, the presence of melodic instruments or the issues raised by the spirits (polygamy and net hunting), *Dāmba* and *Ekāmbaleki* are (or were adapted to become) Mbendjele performances since key elements of the procedure

of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) are present. The spirits are brought in the village by initiates through a sacred path in the forest (*njānga*), and initiates delimit the spirits', men's and women's areas during the performance as roles are gendered. Most importantly, *Dāmba* and *Ekāmbaleki* are 'spirits of joy' (*mokondi ua esεngo*), and bring laughter and joy to the community. While *Dāmba* and *Ekāmbaleki* seem to be specific to Djoubé area, other *mokondi* are wide spread among several Pygmy populations across different countries.

### **Some of Mbendjele's most performed spirits**

In this section, I describe aspects of the performances of three wide spread spirits: *Bolobe*, *Edjengi* and *Dgoku*. Despite the practice of *Bolobe*, *Edjengi* and *Dgoku* performances in several Pygmy communities, important regional differences can be observed from one population to another (Lewis 2002: 173-174). The descriptions I provide come from my participation in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) in the Bonguinda area and allow me to point out regional specificities and to identify common performative aspects of men's and women's *mokondi massana*.

#### *Bolobe* spirit performance

At the time of my stay in Bonguinda, *Bolobe* was the most regularly performed of men's forest spirits. All adult men were initiated to *Bolobe*, therefore in Bonguinda as in every forest camp in the area, there always were people able and willing to perform *Bolobe*. If *Bolobe* did not perform for a few days, people would openly complain and be heard. *Bolobe* performances were held at least once a week, often more. Like Paul, my assistant mentioned earlier, Lewis (2016 pers. com.) says that the *Bolobe* performances as I observed them in Bonguinda are quite different from *Bolobe* performances in the Southern Mbendjele communities living in the Sangha region of RoC, about 300km south from Bonguinda.

When men decide that a *Bolobe* performance should be held, young men have to go fetch fire-wood during the day, enough to hold throughout the evening. Men also have to gather enough materials (leaves of different sorts) to create *Bolobe*'s clothing. When the evening comes, the fire is lit up, and a few teenage girls gather close to the fire and start singing.

Like most musical performance in Mbendjele communities, men are in charge of the drums, and it is men's responsibility to make sure that drums are in good shape for the performance. When a performance takes place in the evening, the drums are warmed up by the fire to stretch their skins and obtain an optimal sound.

For *Bolobe*, children are often necessary to begin and start up a performance since when a *Bolobe* spirit-guardian wants to call his *Bolobe*, he usually asks children to start singing in order to encourage adults to join. Children are in fact the easiest to convince to sing and dance in the evening, even though they sometimes refuse to sing and prefer to play their own games. I saw several times young men trying to convince children to start a *Bolobe* performance; sometimes they managed and sometimes they failed. *Bolobe* spirit-guardians rarely managed to make the performance happen when they did not convince the children to open the singing.

When they do manage, young girls sit together and start singing, while young boys stay close to the fire and dance around, half playing, half dancing, practicing the *Bolobe* spirit's movements. There is a lot of mockery going on between young girls and boys, who do not hesitate to make fun of the way one dances or sings. A couple of adult women usually are around, encouraging the girls to sing properly and strongly, playing the role of 'song guide' (*djāmba*) by starting songs for the young ones to 'take' (see figure 44). When girls do not know what to sing, they ask the *djāmba* for advice, telling them: "give-us a song!" (*beke buse eboka!*). And when a *djāmba* wants a specific song to be done, she expects the young ones to follow her proposition and give them the melodic lines before saying: "take that song!" (*bosa eboka amε embe!*).

Little by little, adult women join the singing while men prepare away from them, hidden inside or behind a house. When the singing starts to take shape after an hour or so, *Bolobe's* mother (*Ngoye a Bolobe*) comes. Entirely covered with a large cloth (see figure 45), *Ngoye a Bolobe* goes around, dancing lightly, encouraging the women to sing by its presence, as its arrival means that *Bolobe* spirits are eventually coming. *Bolobe* spirits never come to dance unless *Ngoye a Bolobe* is there ahead. *Ngoye a Bolobe* goes around in circles, talking in its distinctive voice. Sometimes it

rushes towards the women and threatens to touch them, which makes them get up quickly and run away<sup>47</sup>.

I remember a moment in which a toddler was sitting on the open space, a few meters away from the women. *Ngoye a Bolobe* suddenly started to run and threatened to squash the toddler sitting on his path. The toddler's mother jumped with surprise before rushing to take her child away just a second before *Ngoye a Bolobe*'s passage. This suggests that *Ngoye a Bolobe* delimits the performance area by establishing a clear demarcation between the women's space and the *Bolobe* spirit's space. The toddler was sitting in the spirit's space where he was not allowed, and *Ngoye a Bolobe* made it clear that he needed to move.

These kinds of provocations tend to excite women, who get more into the performance and sing with more and more enthusiasm. I noticed that whenever *Ngoye a Bolobe* suddenly runs towards the women it forces them to get up to avoid it. Women seem to enjoy the thrill as they respond with large smiles, which suggest that such moves are appreciated by women. In such moments, women sing and clap hands more loudly, and often dance for a while as they are standing. It might be that *Ngoye a Bolobe* intentionally makes the women stand to encourage them to dance instead of staying still.

In its attempts to bring more enthusiasm to the women's singing and to reinforce the cohesion of the group of performers, *Ngoye a Bolobe* often uses a specific call and response formula. Every time *Ngoye a Bolobe* uses this formula, everyone (men, women and children) answers in a single voice, helping people to tune in to each other and to enjoy the song even more. The formula can stand as an ending so that everyone finishes a song at the same moment, but it can also be used in the middle of a song, in which case people really get into the song and sing more loudly afterwards. Sometimes people get tired and therefore stop singing and simply clap hands. When *Ngoye a Bolobe* uses this call and response formula, people respond automatically ('wo!') and often start singing again afterwards.

Beat	1		2		3		4		5		
<i>Ngoye a Bolobe</i>	x		x		x		x		x		
Response										x	

**Figure 46:** Call and response formulae used in *Bolobe* performances (Bonguinda area)

<sup>47</sup> See appendix 2 n°7 & 8.

Through my participation in many *Bolobe* performances, I tend to see *Ngoye a Bolobe* as a ‘crowd-warmer’, as many of its moves seem to ‘warm up’ performers. After an hour or so of *Ngoye a Bolobe*’s presence, people are really enthusiastic and sing loudly and beautifully, which attracts the *Bolobe* spirits and invite them to come and dance, first only one or two, although their number can increase up to a dozen according to the number of young men present and willing to perform in the village or camp.

If the performance goes on appropriately, then women will come towards *Bolobe* spirits and dance with them. In Bonguinda, women would dance *edyāṅguma* (see figure 47), while wearing *bandudu* skirts. This dance movement enables women to show off their hips and bottom movements. Since Mbendjele are very critical when it comes to music and dance, women would often make fun of the way one performs *edyāṅguma*, laughing and mimicking each other. Women can also dance standing, moving their hips from left to right while making sure the *bandudu* skirt moves properly and accentuates the outline of buttocks. In Bonguinda, women could get quite close to the *Bolobe* spirits, which is not the case in other Mbendjele communities. Paul, a Mbendjele man living in the logging town of Pokola was quite astonished to see how close women would get to the spirits. “This would never happen in Pokola!” he told me, amazed by what he was seeing.

The *Bolobe* spirits come according to the quality of the singing. They will not come until the singing is good enough, and they will leave the scene as soon as the singing loses its intensity. *Ngoye a Bolobe* helps to bring the spirits by encouraging women to sing with enthusiasm through its erratic movements and the use of the call and response formula described above.

*Bolobe* spirits –like all men’s spirits apart from *Dāmba* (see above) - are very sensitive when it comes to the quality of the singing. They cannot dance if the singing is not good enough, and they sometimes try and come to dance, but if the women’s singing is of poor quality, spirits will go back to the forest and wait until the singing gets better. If it does not, spirits will not come back and men will reproach women for not doing their job properly and for ruining the performance. One evening (February 2014), men were really in the mood for *massana*. But women were tired

and did not feel like doing *massana*. Men did their best to start a *Bolobe* performance and they got the children's support. Women came to join, yet they did not participate much. They were chatting most of the time without singing, which resulted in a singing of poor quality. Nevertheless the *Bolobe* spirits kept coming. Sometimes they kept dancing even though women were not singing any song (*beboka*) or percussive song (*esime*). They would dance only to the sound of drums. Women got angry after a couple of hours. "You dance on your own!" (*Bune bina na kbwi!*) a woman told the spirits. That time, the women themselves considered that their singing was not worthy of the spirits, and that the spirits simply should not come to the village. That evening the *Bolobe* performance did not last and by midnight everyone was asleep.

Because *Bolobe* performances happen on a regular basis, they often bring out unspoken conflicts. One night in June 2014, the children were in a very good mood. Strong moon-light enabled them to play in the evening, and they were eager to enjoy *Bolobe*'s joy even though no adults were with them. The girls sat together and sang *Bolobe* songs while the boys were playing the drums and dancing around. Adults advised them from a distance but did not join them. The children were doing such a great job that they managed to get the songs going without any *djamba* (song leader). They did so well that Nyemu decided to call his *Bolobe mokondi*. He sent his nephew Mongi to get the *Bolobe* spirit ready and sat down to watch the young initiates perform. The performance kept going, and the adults around were very pleased to see the children perform so well. They were encouraging them to keep singing and to dance energetically. The adults smiled while commenting on the children's progress, laughing at the funny way some of them danced or making fun of one's strange voice.

The evening was lovely until some young men from the houses on the opposite of the dancing started to throw palm nut kernels (*ndika*) to the dancers. A few of them got hurt and it disturbed the performance. The children kept singing for a little while, but then got tired of the kernels that were thrown at them and everyone went to bed. The next day, early in the morning, two clans started to get into an argument. The children's relatives accused the neighbouring clan of having 'stolen' the performance by insulting Nyemu's *Bolobe mokondi* while not respecting children's efforts to bring *massana*'s joy to the village. Women from both clans started to fight, around six

women punching and kicking each other. Neighbours came to calm people down though it was not easy.

It turned out that people were arguing about a man who was said not to help his in-laws enough. In Mbendjele society, when a couple wants to get married, the fiancé must perform bride service for his new in-laws for a while (a few months or a year) and participate to the family's economy by bringing meat and honey, in order to prove that he has the forest skills required to take care of his wife and children to come. In this case, the husband did not get on well with his in-laws, and had refused to stay in the same camp as expected. The palm nuts were a message expressing the in-laws' disapproval of the husband's attitude. During the argument, Nyemu stayed in his plot, and did not get involved in the fight. He knew that the ruining of the performance the night before had nothing to do with him or his *Bolobe mokondi*, so he did his best to avoid intervening.

Nyemu is admired in the community for his ability to stay calm and avoid arguments as this example demonstrates. If the *Bolobe*' spirit-guardian had been someone less peace-loving, a very serious argument could have emerged from this incident. People can become sworn enemies after such disrespectful behaviour. In Bonguinda, two men became enemies after one of them stole the other's *Bolobe mokondi*. For years after the event, they stayed away from each other. When occasions brought them together for funerals or lifting of mourning ceremonies, they always ended up fighting fiercely, and people often struggled to manage their enmity that often seemed on the brink of degenerating into serious violence. Forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) often reveal conflicts between individuals or groups because they require such sincere cooperation between all participants to be a success.

In men's forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) such as *Edjengi* or *Bolobe*, women have to cooperate in order to maintain the spirits' excitement and willingness to perform. Teenage girls are crucial to the intensity of a song and therefore have a good share of responsibility in the success of men's forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). Even though the 'song guide' (*djamba*) is mostly an adult, young girls and teenage girls are the ones who get the song going. Whenever they stop singing, the intensity of the song drops and has to be raised again.

At the end of February 2014, a *Bolobe* performance was held in Bonguinda. As the singing was losing intensity, a woman called out to the teenage girls: “You, with the small throats/voices, take the lead!” (*Bune baana na kingo musoni emba eboka boso!*). Another woman sitting next to her responded: “Leave it! They don’t even want to sing!” (*Ta dika! Bene badiemba tãmbi!*) The comments were intended to provoke the young and teenage girls into showing the adults how wrong they were. The Mbendjele love to tease each other and the proper reaction is to prove the teaser wrong. Indeed that evening the girls sang as loud as they could to show the older ones how good they could be when they wanted. Here are a few examples of how Mbendjele use teasing to incite each other to perform better during *massana* performances:

<i>Bune vea, bune die musiki pãmba!</i>	You come and still you sit there doing nothing!
<i>Bato balala ko!</i>	People are sleeping here!
<i>Beboka amuwa!</i>	The song died!
<i>Bune diemba te?</i>	Won’t you sing?

Many performative skills are needed to ensure *Bolobe* is performed properly. Despite the apparent casualness and freedom of performers, roles are strictly established and each individual is responsible for the success of a performance (e.g. drummers, song guide, young female singers). It only takes one imperfection to prevent people from achieving the profound and joyful emotional state they are looking for. In *Bolobe* as in *Edjengi* performances, the spirit’s clothing is of paramount importance.

### *Edjengi* spirit performance

*Edjengi* is considered by the Mbendjele to be the most powerful and the most dangerous of all spirits. Indeed, any woman or non-initiated child who touches *Edjengi*’s clothing will be cut and bleed to death (Lewis 2002: 186). This death threat that is perpetually held above people’s heads during the performance gives *Edjengi* performance a specific atmosphere that is quite different from other *mokondi massana*.

*Edjengi* is always called for the lifting of mourning, among Mbendjele communities but also for non-Pygmy *Bilo* farmers. *Bilo* often ask Mbendjele to perform *Edjengi*, and in exchange they provide them with lots of food, alcohol and smoke. When



*Edjengi* dances during these occasions it removes the pollution of death, allowing the bereaved to go back to life without fearing the dead to be jealous (Lewis 2002: 185). *Edjengi* is also danced when there is food in abundance in a village. *Edjengi* performance can last several days, and therefore requires large amounts of food to sustain people while they are performing. When someone organises an *Edjengi* performance, he has to provide food, drink and smoke for everyone. Members of his family and friends will help him to gather all the food needed. That's why *Edjengi* cannot be called if there is not enough food in the village, which makes of *Edjengi* a spirit of abundance. If an *Edjengi* performance is put in place without food in sufficient quantities, people might refuse to participate, accusing the organizers of making *Edjengi* dance in bad conditions. A grand-mother once told me: “*enda ebe! Mokondi a bina na nzala!*” (“It’s a very bad thing! The spirit is forced to dance while starving!”), before leaving the village in which the performance was taking place. This reaction confirms that in Bonguinda *Edjengi* is also a spirit which celebrates abundance (Lewis 2002: 174).

In Bonguinda area, *Edjengi* can also be called simply to have some good time. For example, *Edjengi* can be called during Christmas and New Years Eve period. The Mbendjele do not pay any attention to the religious meaning of this celebration, but understand that it’s a good time to party. *Edjengi* is therefore the best way to enjoy a festive moment because he requires plenty of food and other consumables to be present in the camp or village.

Contrary to other spirits like *Bolobe*, *Edjengi* always looks the same, whatever the region or even the country. Every community in the RoC has the same dress code for *Edjengi*, and *Jengi* in Cameroon also looks exactly the same (Förniss 2014). *Edjengi*’s clothing is collected by initiated men from established raphia stands in a marsh, and then prepared in advance (Lewis 2002: 186). In Bonguinda, the raphia leaflets are brought back to the village by initiated men, often singing loudly to let people know that *Edjengi* is on its way. The same scene happens again when *Edjengi* performance is over. When men carry, their procession is called *Libongu*, literally ‘the waterfront’ (see figure 48)<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Men sometimes use *Libongu* to communicate with women as a group. I provide a description of gender communication through the use of *Libongu* in chapter 1.

Being a woman, I was strictly forbidden to enter men's sacred path (*njānga*) and therefore I do not know how *Edjengi* is called by initiated men. Women lure the spirit in the village with their beautiful singing and attractive dancing. The staging of *Edjengi* performances somehow resembles *Ekāmbaleki*'s. The drums are the only component that stays still, as *Edjengi* itself, men and women are in constant movement. Although in *Edjengi* performances women stay in one or several compact groups, during *Ekāmbaleki* women are scattered all around.

To begin the *Edjengi* performance, women gather on an agreed plot and sit together. They start singing songs from the *Edjengi*'s repertoire, helped by the drums. Among women, coordination has to be perfect in order to create some singing beautiful enough to lure *Edjengi* into the village. One or two women fill the role of 'song guide' (*djāmba*). Most of the women wear *bandudu*, a leaf skirt that amplifies their bottom's movements. As Lewis pointed out, "Many Mbendjele men are obsessed with women's bottoms" (Lewis 2002: 187), and women are very aware of their sexiness when they dance. By wearing a *bandudu* skirt and making desirable dance movements with their bottoms, women use their more sexy asset to attract the *Edjengi* spirit in the village, as "a woman's bottom wiggling quickly, especially a plump one rippling makes many Mbendjele men, or an *Ejengi*, become consumed with lust" (*ibid.*: 187-188). Once the singing is beautiful enough, *Edjengi* arrives, well guarded by men. For the Mbendjele, *Edjengi* performances are a very serious matter, which implies that strict rules need to be obeyed.

The most important rule concerns women and children's security. *Edjengi* being a very dangerous spirit, a performance cannot take place if people are not protected. It is men's role to make sure *Edjengi* does not hurt anyone. Men form a barrier between women and the spirit, and follow it when *Edjengi* moves around. As *Edjengi* performances usually last several days, it can happen that *Edjengi* goes around the village on his own in between performances. In these occasions, men must stay attentive since women and children can be endangered. Regardless of what women and children are doing, singing, dancing or conducting their daily business, men must always make sure *Edjengi* is controlled (see plate 9).

I remember one occasion in Bonguinda in which women and children were singing and dancing around with *Edjengi*. The performance had been going on for days, and

at that moment no men were around except for the drummers. *Edjengi* started getting closer and closer to women, creating a mess among the singers and scaring them. Some children were so scared of the spirit that they cried and ran away as *Edjengi* was dangerously twirling in their direction. After a little while Nyemu's mother, Mungwo, a respected elder (*kombeti*) decided that it was enough. She shouted at the men, accusing them of failing to do their job properly. "*Mokondi adwa kilikili, baito badie na pasi!*" ("The spirit is out of control, women are suffering!"). She smashed the *mbāndjo*, the men's sitting area, and took the drums away, to stop the performance.

Some elder women have a special status of 'mother of all spirits' (*ngoye ua mokondi*) as they entertain a special relationship with all forest spirits (Lewis 2002: 191). These post-menopausal elders are recognized by the community as being very strong. In addition to their status as spirit-guardian (*konja ua mokondi*) of women's spirits, they cannot be harmed by men's spirits due to the exceptional strength of their mystical power that protects them from danger. Mungwo stood between *Edjengi* and the women, holding *Edjengi*'s leaves to stop it from going further. The men being obviously to blame, they did not try to argue and *Edjengi* was brought back to the *njānga* sacred path. The performance started again in the evening, and this time men were closely surrounding *Edjengi*, to make sure the afternoon's mistake would not happen again.

The analysis of several successful and failed rituals enabled me to identify implicit aesthetic rules in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), and to highlight their importance in the process of sharing collective emotions. The apparent casualness of performers hides a strict attention to details and a high awareness of performers' emotions, level of energy, mood and so on. Regardless of their roles, performers are compelled to be in constant interaction with each other, and to 'tune' themselves collectively. In the next section, I interrogate the nature of what influences changes in atmosphere and type of collective emotions from one performance to another. This leads me to focus on visual aesthetics and to consider the uniqueness of each forest spirit (*mokondi*) through an analysis of *mokondi*'s personalities.

## **Visual aesthetics in forest spirit performances:**

### ***Bolobe, Edjengi and Ngoku***

If the rules are the same in all *Edjengi* performances, the emotional content of a performance is deeply conditioned by spirits' personal identities. In this section, I first look at the design and manufacturing of *Bolobe* and *Edjengi*'s clothing in order to identify the mechanisms through which spirits' appearance is created. I then emphasise the impact of spirit's individual personalities on the atmosphere of a performance by looking at specificities in *Edjengi* and *Ngoku* performances.

### ***Bolobe and Edjengi's clothing***

*Bolobe* spirits have different shapes and looks as each *Bolobe mokondi* has a specific way to be dressed. Very similarly to the Baka of Cameroon, the Mbendjele of Bonguinda use a limited number of elements which are worn and combined in various ways to create multiple variations. Descriptions provided by Tsuru showed that the Baka of Cameroon create new clothing for their spirits from a limited range of material elements (Tsuru 2001: 120-121). Similarly, the Mbendjele of Bonguinda use the same basic material elements for their *Bolobe mokondi*'s clothing, but each *mokondi* has a specific way to combine these elements which results in a great diversity of looks and designs. This section first focuses on *Bolobe mokondi* visual aesthetics and shows how, despite an apparent diversity, all *Bolobe mokondi*'s clothing are made from the same limited materials. An examination of clothing design then shows that, while *Bolobe* are male spirits, in contrast to Mbendjele further south, Bonguinda women play a surprisingly important part in the design of the *Bolobe mokondi*'s clothing.

#### The combinations that make *Bolobe mokondi*'s clothing

In Bonguinda, *Bolobe mokondi* appear in various shapes and are quite distinct from one another. The only common feature between all *Bolobe mokondi* in Bonguinda was the *bandudu* skirt, a thick skirt made of leaves which is usually made by

women<sup>49</sup>. These *bandudu* skirts can be worn by both men's spirits and women, even though they do not wear them in the same way. Men use large and thick *bandudu* skirts which they tie just under their *Bolobe mokondi's* waist while women use thin *bandudu* skirts and wear them on their hips or even lower, so that the upper part of the skirt rests on the buttocks (see plate 10). The emblematic dance movements of *Bolobe* spirits consist in a rapid rotation of the dancer's hips from side to side (*digidigi*), and the *bandudu* skirt visually amplifies the movement, creating an impressive sight. *Bolobe's* face is always hidden, though sometimes *Bolobe* can have its legs, arms and chest apparent. *Bolobe mokondi* can also use *bekpadja* skirts made of dried woven raphia strings normally worn by women. While women only use *bekpadja* as skirts, men use them in various ways as elements of their *Bolobe mokondi's* clothing, to cover their *mokondi's* chest or head (see plate 11).

Based on my observations in Bonguinda, *Bolobe's* clothing is made out of seven material elements, which are combined in various ways, and not all the elements are necessarily used. These elements are the *bandudu* and *bekpadja* skirts described above; young raphia leaves that are the same leaves used for *Edjengi's* clothing; fresh and dried banana leaves; ashes to cover the *mokondi's* body; and small cloth items such as short pants, trousers or socks. One *Bolobe mokondi's* clothing is made of a *bandudu* skirt, young raphia leaves, dried banana leaves and ashes. Another *Bolobe mokondi's* clothing is made of three *bekpadja* skirts, short pants, socks and a *bandudu* skirt. Another one uses a *bandudu* skirt, fresh banana leaves and a few young raphia leaves to cover its head and legs. Even when two *Bolobe mokondi's* clothing are made out of the same combination of elements, they can look very different as the elements are not assembled in the same way on the *mokondi's* body (see plate 12).

The modular character of the materials' combinations in the manufacturing of *Bolobe* spirits' clothing echoes the structure of *Bolobe's* songs, as singers chose from a limited number of melodic lines and improvisational modules to create new versions of the same song (see chapter 3). The underlying principles of musical and visual aesthetics are very similar as they are both based on combinations. While using the

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<sup>49</sup> I provide details on the role of women in *Bolobe's* clothing design later on in this chapter.

same basic elements, a countless number of songs and clothing can potentially be created through the application of the combinatorial principle.

Fürniss noted about the structure of Aka counterpentic singing that “paradoxically, the simplicity of the substrata is what makes the complexity so possible to achieve” (Fürniss 2006: 26). It might be that the combinatorial principle is one of the key elements of BaYaka’s aesthetics, as several aesthetic domains of spirit performances are based on this principle as Fürniss described on Aka’s music, and Tsuru on Baka spirits’ clothing (Fürniss 1999; Tsuru 1998). The analysis of combinations on dance movements, singing parts, rhythmic formulas and spirits’s clothing among BaYaka populations seems to confirm the recurrence of the combinatorial principle in BaYaka’s aesthetics. What Fürniss called the ‘combinatoire de paramètres’ (Fürniss 1999) could well be a principle which exists beyond singing and spirits’ clothing (Tsuru 2001), and which is potentially applied to every aesthetic domain of BaYaka’s spirit performances. The combinatory principle could explain the dichotomy between the remarkable diversity of Pygmies’ spirit performances and the similarity of conceptions across wide areas.

#### Design and manufacturing of *Bolobe mokondi*’s clothing

Even though men are the ones who ultimately decide on the spirits’ appearance, women play a role in the design of some of its elements. The *bandudu* skirts that the *Bolobe* spirits wear are often entirely made by women of the male initiates’ families. I was once sitting with Ai in June 2014 in Bonguinda, and she was making a *bandudu* skirt in a very artistic way. I was surprised to see her do that, as no *Bolobe* performance was planned that day. I asked her what it was for, and she told me that it was for Mongi, her nephew. He had gone to Pokola for a month or two to look for work and make enough money to buy a radio. Ai told me that the skirt was so that he could use it to dress his *Bolobe mokondi* when he would be back.

Sometimes, *bandudu* skirts are designed by both the initiate and a woman. The initiate picks up the leaves he wants for his skirt, and then brings them to a woman of his choice so that she can make the skirt. The design varies depending on the species of leaves chosen and on the way leaves are assembled to make the skirt. One day, Mongi decided to perform his *Bolobe*. He went to the forest to collect some fire-wood and on his way back, he collected some leaves and gave them to Tokabe,

his twelve-year-old cousin so that she could make the *bandudu* skirt. They briefly discussed the design and Mongi showed her how long he wanted the skirt to be. Tokabe discarded the problem as being nonsense. “I know your spirit very well, she said, don’t worry I’ll do it just fine” (*Amɛ eba mokondi āngofɛ. Mɛndɔ uete amɛ kokia ka bien* [French]). Indeed the length of the *bandudu* skirt depends on the body shape of the *Bolobe mokondi*. As *Bolobe*’s dancing movements mainly consist in constantly rotating the hips, it is important that the skirt is at the right length to allow the dance to be fluid. Tokabe is very close to her cousin Mongi who lives with Tokabe’s family most of the year. She knows his *Bolobe mokondi*’s body shape very well and has made skirts for it several times. She was thus able to make the perfect *bandudu* skirt for Mongi’s *Bolobe mokondi*, which indeed performed very well that night (see figure 49).

This is probably the reason why men choose carefully the women who make their *bandudu* skirts, as on their skills will depend the quality of the spirit’s appearance. This also means that before the *Bolobe* performance actually starts, men and women already cooperate to make the performance happen. When men give leaves to women, it can also be a warning that a *Bolobe* performance is going to be held. One day (January 2014), Monoi came back from the forest with a bunch of leaves. Without a word, he gave them to his wife Pelagie before continuing his way. Surprised, Pelagie had a quick look at the leaves, then just asked her husband: “Skirts, hey?” (*Bandudu e?*). Monoi did not turn back or slow down. He just shouted a single cry, just like one of *Bolobe*’s. Pelagie carefully put the leaves aside before asking her ten-year-old daughter Mondomba to make a *bandudu* skirt for her father. I realized that men had planned the *Bolobe* performance ahead when I saw that several women in the village were preparing *bandudu* skirts at the same time. Teenage girls also got ready and prepared skirts for themselves, so that they could dance *edyānguma* with the *Bolobe* spirits.

#### The impact of *Edjɛngi*’s clothing on the quality of a performance

The visual aesthetics and therefore the design of *mokondi*’s clothing is a very important part of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). If the spirits are not dressed properly, the performance cannot reach the high quality level that people are aiming for. Here is an example of how visual aesthetics act upon the quality of *Edjɛngi* performance.

During the New Year's festivities of 2014, people from Bonguinda decided to organise an *Edjengi* performance specifically for children. Several *Edjengi*, *Bolobe*, *Ngoku* and *Diānga*<sup>50</sup> performances had been held the last few days, and people decided that they should do one especially for the young initiates and girls (under fifteen-years-old). When I asked people why they would want that, they answered that it was a good training for children. They also said that it was a time of festivity and that they were supposed to celebrate in any possible way. *Edjengi* was thus performed by very young initiated boys and men, between seven- and twelve-years-old. Three young men in their twenties were supervising the performance. They helped the young initiates to go and get the yellow leaves of *Edjengi* spirit (*djongu*), and chose a good song for *Libongu* (litt. “the waterfront”) to bring the leaves (*djongu*) in the *njānga* sacred path (see figure 50).

Once the public part of *Edjengi* performance started, three adult men were playing the drums – which are physically too hard to handle for a child- and helping out the young initiates with the choice of songs. They also guided the *Edjengi* spirit's movements around the place, although the young initiates were mostly managing *Edjengi* themselves. They seemed to be taking their role very seriously, and made sure the spirit would not get too close to the girls. The later were singing and dancing enthusiastically, getting as close as they would dare to the *Edjengi* spirit before running away as fast as they could. A few women were helping girls and accompanied them in the dance (see figure 51).

The young initiates were not doing such a great job though. The *Edjengi* spirit was not covered properly by the long yellow leaves (*djongu*), and some body parts of the spirit could be seen underneath. The spirit had also some troubles orientating himself around the square where the performance was held. A woman suddenly decided that it was too much and that the performance should stop. “We do not want to sing in this mess!” (*Buse di emba kili kili te!*) she said, walking angrily towards the men. Supported by several of her girlfriends, she managed to put the performance to an end.

Later on, I was walking in the forest with Nyemu when he complained to me about the way the *Edjengi* spirit had danced. “He showed his face” (*Yome amuufa*) he told

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<sup>50</sup> *Diānga* is a type of dance performed by women.



me with a sad look. Indeed, *Edjɛŋgi* spirit did not have enough *djɔŋgu* leaves to cover his body properly. *Edjɛŋgi*'s dancing movements imply a lot of whirling and if the leaves are not disposed properly around the spirit, his body parts can be seen by the audience.

According to both Mbendjele men and women to whom I spoke, seeing the spirit is a very bad thing since it endangers those who see it and a sign of a poor performance by the initiates. The initiates have a few tricks to help hide *Edjɛŋgi*'s body. Mongi (twenty-three-years-old man) explained to me that men use palm leaves (in the *Edjɛŋgi* performance circumstance: *mbundje*) to strike the *Edjɛŋgi* spirit which helps to hide the spirit and to protect women from seeing it.

It has to be noted that from what I saw during my time in the Likouala region, when *Edjɛŋgi* is performed for a funeral the spirit is always properly covered. I gather that the importance of the event is proportionate to the skills and experience of the initiates. I also have to indicate that nowadays in Bonguinda, children are initiated much younger than they use to. Mbio (thirty-five-years-old man) explained to me that it was a financial issue. When six- or seven-year-old are initiated, their initiation is much shorter and easier than an adult's. It is therefore much less of a burden on their families since the demands made by *Edjɛŋgi* will not continue for too many days. It means that children are called initiates and treated as such even though their knowledge of the *Edjɛŋgi* performance is not properly constructed yet; this will not prevent the children from becoming tremendous performers in a few years time.

### ***Mokondi's personalities: Edjɛŋgi and ɪŋɔku***

Additionally to clothing, *mokondi* have distinctive characters and body movements. Each *mokondi*'s performative habits are unique and forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*)' aesthetics are conditioned by the personality of the *mokondi* performing. I provide ethnographic examples of distinct *Edjɛŋgi* and *ɪŋɔku mokondi* in order to demonstrate that performances of same-class spirits can be very different from one another since each *mokondi* has its own character.

### Bale's *Edjengi mokondi*: a troublesome character

Bale (sixty-years-old man) is the guardian of a very troublesome *Edjengi*<sup>51</sup>. He is fierce and very dangerous, but very entertaining as well thanks to his ability to inject extraordinary energy into performers. One day in Bonguinda, Bale decided to call his *Edjengi mokondi*<sup>52</sup>. The performance was planned ahead as a few young men went to the forest to collect *Edjengi*'s leaves. They came back at night and brought *Libongu* to Bale's plot, before going away towards the sacred path (*njānga*). The next day around 8AM, I was sitting with Nyemu on our plot having a chat. The village was quiet and we heard the swishing sound of *Edjengi*'s leaves coming towards us. *Edjengi* came to Nyemu and sat close to him on the ground, his leaves covering Nyemu's feet. "Come on everybody, we have to go perform" (*Bato bese buse dwa massana*) said Nyemu, and *Edjengi* went away as fast as he had come. Children went running after it and the performance was expected to begin soon.

A few young men got in place with the drums on Bale's plot and started to sing songs from *Edjengi*'s repertoire. Though there were no women around. Most of the teenage girls were performing *Diānga* -a women's dance- on another plot and did not want to stop and do *Edjengi* instead. A curious battle happened then, during which men kept passing by performing *So* -a men's *mokondi* spirit-, in the middle of women's *Diānga*, in an attempt to disrupt their performance and convince them to join the *Edjengi* performance. At first, women firmly refused and continued singing and dancing *Diānga*, singing even louder when men ran among them singing *So* songs. While men and women were musically arguing to decide whether they should do *Diānga* or *Edjengi*, Bale's spirit was getting agitated. He was standing on Bale's plot though none of its songs could be heard. A few young men tried to appease the spirit by singing on their own while playing the drums, but the spirit needed the women's singing to be satisfied and willing to perform. *Edjengi* thus got angry and started to destroy a house's roof. He threatened to uproot banana trees and ran angrily towards men. The latter started to get scared and asked the spirit to be

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<sup>51</sup> The secrecy surrounding men's spirit-guardianship is taken very seriously by the Mbendjele, and most of its knowledge is inaccessible to the uninitiated (Lewis 2002: 140). During interviews with initiated men, I often struggled to gather information because of my status of woman. Men always felt very uncomfortable when discussing with me about their spirits and the relation they entertain with them, and for this reason I soon stopped asking questions on this subject. I therefore do not know the names of men's *mokondi* spirits, and describe men's spirit performances from the point of view of women.

<sup>52</sup> See appendix 2 n°9.

patient and to stay calm. “Slowly, slowly, please excuse us!” (*namana namana pardon* [French]!) said a man while *Edjengi* was threatening to destroy his house walls.

On the intense insistence of men and as the spirit was getting really angry, women capitulated and went to Bale’s plot to join the *Edjengi* performance. They were already in the mood for *massana* as they had just performed a *Diānga* dance. The teenage girls were thus very excited and the performance got very good very quickly. Bale’s *Edjengi* was playing with the performers, running really fast towards the women before stopping abruptly. After a few hours, teenagers were getting too excited according to men, and Bale threatened to put an end to the performance because he did not like the way people were reacting to his *Edjengi mokondi*’s presence. Even I could see that the atmosphere was electric and that it might not end well. The teenage girls then started an *esime* (section of a song) which consists in a single note sung in unison which lasts for several minutes. Understanding that Bale wanted the performance to come to an end, the youth had decided to take the spirit somewhere else so that they could continue the performance without Bale. While singing the *esime*, they attracted the spirit away from Bale’s plot and carried on with the performance in another location. The attempt failed though as Bale sent initiated men to take the spirit, and they brought him back to the forest. “It’s over now. It’s over!” (*Esili ko! Esili déjà* [French]!) said an initiated man as he struggled to disperse people. The teenagers finally gave up and went away to look for food.

This example shows how the character of Bale’ *Edjengi mokondi* influenced the performance. This particular *Edjengi mokondi* is very difficult to control, as Nyemu explained to me. Bale and initiated men struggle to contain this *Edjengi mokondi*’s energy and it often turns the youth into a dangerously empowered crowd that might degenerate into violence. Bale’s *Edjengi* is very powerful, though it is a double-edged sword. Bale’s *Edjengi* can provoke tremendous and magnificent *massana* performances, yet the excitement it creates is sometimes too big to be managed by his guardian, which constrains Bale to limit the number of appearances of his *Edjengi* in order to avoid bringing trouble to the community. A performance is thus conditioned by *mokondi* spirits’ characters, and the performance’s dynamics are forged by the spirits’ character interacting with participants.

### *Dgɔku mokondi's* visual aesthetics: women's spirits' individual characters

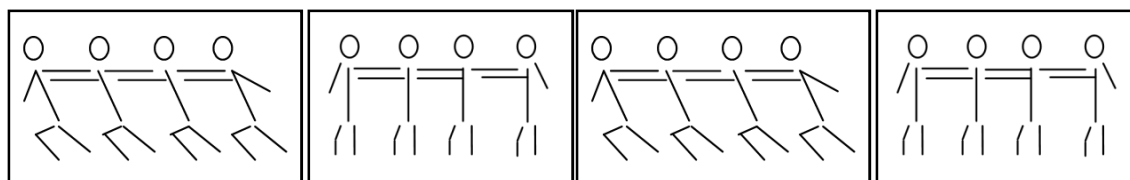
In anthropological descriptions of Aka spirit performances, *Dgɔku* is described as a spirit embodied collectively by a compact group of women, tightly gathered and touching each other. According to Lewis' descriptions, contrary to men's spirit performances in which the spirit is embodied by individuals the specificity of *Dgɔku* (and women's spirits in general) is that the spirit is embodied by the whole group of women (Lewis 2002: 191-195). Kisliuk provided a description similar to Lewis's of the Aka of CAR's *Dingboku* dance: "a small group of women, bunched together arm-over-arm, hopped foot-to-foot to the edge of the seated women, singing as they went" (Kisliuk 1998: 41).

In Bonguinda, *Dgɔku* manifests herself in two ways. Some *Dgɔku mokondi* are embodied collectively while unusually in comparison to other areas, some *Dgɔku mokondi* are embodied by an individual woman. While men spirits' individual specificities have been acknowledged (Lewis 2002: 139), the individuality of women's spirits has not been described with as much detail as presented here. This section provides evidence of the variety of *Dgɔku mokondi's* characters, and shows that, similarly to men's spirits, each *Dgɔku mokondi* is unique and has an individual way of performing.

The following chapter describes the performance of four *Dgɔku mokondi* and shows that the class of *Dgɔku* spirit is not homogenous. Several aspects of the performance can vary, while others are always present. This section focuses on *Dgɔku mokondi's* visual aesthetics and describes *Dgɔku's* appearance and requirements during performances, in order to differentiate between elements common to all *Dgɔku mokondi* and elements specific to individual *Dgɔku mokondi*.

When *Dgɔku* is embodied collectively, the dance movements are limited, as mostly two movements are done, one being a faster version of the other. Whether a *Dgɔku mokondi* is embodied collectively by a group of women initiates or individually by a single woman surrounded by initiates, one dance movement is always present and seems to be wide spread as descriptions of Southern Mbendjele and Aka of CAR's women performances demonstrates (Lewis 2002: 191-195; Kisliuk 1998: 41). The women initiates walk all together, stomping their feet on the ground at the same pace

in an asymmetric movement (see figure 52). Women hold their shoulders and form one or several lines touching each other. As they advance, they bend the left knee, then make a normal step with the right foot, then bend the left knee again, in a regular and repetitive movement.



**Figure 52:** Emblematic dance movement of *Ngɔku* performances

Initiate women sing while dancing, as one or two women take care of the rhythmic formula, beating a plastic container or a pot with a stick or with her hand. During this movement, women can sing *beboka* or *esime* songs. In all *Ngɔku* performances though, the *esime* songs are responsorial. This differs from *esime* sung during men's spirit performances, as in *Bolobe* and *Edjengi* the *esime* are more varied.

This dance movement can also be realized much faster, when instead of walking, women run. On some occasions in Bonguinda, young initiates perform *Ngɔku* on their own, and they appreciate the fast version of this dance movement very much. Just lit up by the moon light, girls run as fast as they can, struggling to keep the group compact, the youngest ones making gigantic steps to keep up with the eldest. They enjoy also doing it under the rain, stomping in the puddles, splashing all around. This dance movement is usually done while singing *esime* of the responsorial form.

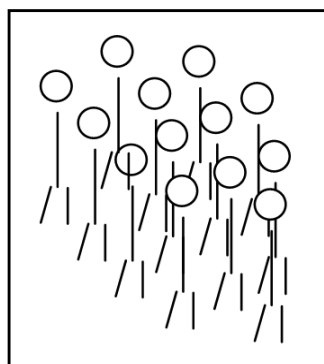
These two versions (slow and fast) of a dance movement are used in every *Ngɔku* performance I participated in and considering Lewis's and Kisliuk's descriptions they can be considered as an emblematic aspect of *Ngɔku* performances. Regardless of whether *Ngɔku* is embodied individually or collectively, women have to agree on what they are going to do, although when *Ngɔku* is embodied individually, the spirit is leading. This is not an authoritarian position, as the spirit sometimes has to follow the group if what it proposes does not suit the others.

The shape of a collectively embodied *Ngɔku mokondi* gives the impression of a big animal, making strange noises and drumming, going sometimes at a very fast pace,

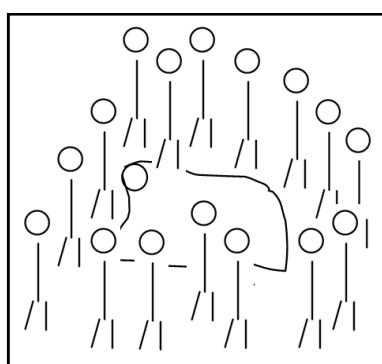
singing very loudly. On the contrary, individually embodied *Dgɔku mokondi* have various shapes. Mungwɔ's *mokondi* for instance appears covered by a large cloth, and requires to be closely surrounded by initiated woman to be protected, as this spirit does not like to be seen by men (see plate 13).

**Plate 13: *Dgɔku mokondi*'s appearance**

**Figure 13.1:** Appearance of a collectively embodied *Dgɔku mokondi*:



**Figure 13.2:** Appearance of Mungwɔ's *Dgɔku mokondi*:



The way Mungwɔ's *Dgɔku mokondi* stands and moves resembles *Dgoye a Bolobe*'s, although Mungwɔ's *Dgɔku mokondi* is very shy and does not move fast. Instead, it evolves slowly and often goes back to the forest. Women initiates have to keep singing and dancing to convince *Dgɔku* to come back again to the camp. The way things unfold during the performance thus differ from one *Dgɔku mokondi* to another (see table 3). Each *Dgɔku mokondi* has specific requirements which are made explicit by the spirit-guardian. Like so, Modiembe's *Dgɔku mokondi* requires women initiates to 'give' games to the spirit (*kaba massana*) throughout the performance, and it does not allow women to have breaks. It also asks to be fed after each performance otherwise it might refuse to come back. Mungwɔ's *Dgɔku mokondi* does not ask for games as it needs to be constantly surrounded and protected. In the table below I give examples of several *Dgɔku mokondi*'s requirements, to show that each *mokondi* has specific performative needs.

<i>Dgɔku mokondi</i> 's requirements	Collective		Individual	
	In Bonguinda	In Indongo	Modiembe's	Mungwɔ's
Games	✓	✗	✓	✗
Breaks	✓	✓	✗	✗
Food	✓ / ✗	✗	✓	✗

**Table 3:** *Dgɔku mokondi*'s requirements

Through the comparative analysis of *Dgɔku mokondi*'s appearances and requirements, I point out the importance of *Dgɔku mokondi*'s identities, and highlight the fact that women's *mokondi* have personalities which have a profound impact on performances' aesthetics. Further evidence of the distinctiveness of each *Dgɔku mokondi* is provided in the following chapter through the description of several performances.

### ***Mokondi*'s dance movements**

Each class of *mokondi* (e.g. *Bolobe*, *Edjɛŋgi*, *Dgɔku*) is characterised by specific dance movements but subtle variations exist between *mokondi*'s dance style within a class. *Bolobe*'s most emblematic dance movement is when the spirit uses his hips. As mentioned earlier, it is called *digidigi* and is done by all the *Bolobe* spirits I have seen perform in Bonguinda's area. Each *Bolobe mokondi* has nonetheless a personal dance style and individual ways to interpret this dance movement. Just like clothing, dance is used by initiates to express and reveal the character and identity of their spirits. Mbendjele men are in this regard very creative and innovative. Some *Bolobe mokondi* are shy and prefer to dance with other *Bolobe mokondi*, staying close to each other and turning their backs to women. Others are more solitary and enjoy showing off on their own, going towards women without any sort of timidity. *Edjɛŋgi mokondi* also display various characters. Some *Edjɛŋgi mokondi* are known for the beauty of their dance movements, while others are known as being trouble (*mobulu*) as Bale's example indicates.

When looking at *mokondi* spirits' visual aesthetics, technical aspects have to be considered to interpret individual choices in terms of music and dance. If dance styles reflect spirits' personalities, some dance movements can also have a technical function, as the next example will demonstrate.

In April 2014, I noticed an innovation in *Bolobe* spirits dance movements. During one *Bolobe* performance, one spirit suddenly got down on his knees, and started to slap the ground with his palms in rhythm. Soon all the *Bolobe* spirits imitated him and they all slapped the ground, creating a huge cloud of dust around them. After a few minutes they got back on their feet and continued to dance. A few days later another

*Bolobe* performance was held and the spirits did the same move. After the performance, I asked Mongi what that dance movement meant. He told me that one *Bolobe mokondi* did it and that all had followed. He said that this dance movement was a good way for the *mokondi* to rest a bit (*ba pema*) while creating an interesting vision with the cloud of dust.

It might be that, contrary to what Mongi presented, this dance movement is not an innovation but a copying, as I witnessed this dance movement in Bangui-Motaba performed by *Matisangomba*, a spirit whose performance resembles *Bolobe*'s. I focused on Bonguinda's area for my fieldwork study, therefore I am unsure of the location where this dance movement appeared and/or was borrowed and further comparative studies are needed to answer this question. Mongi's comment nonetheless echoes Tsuru's observations on the Baka of Cameroon. He found that "bands and individuals behave arbitrarily in ritual activities, promoting spontaneous modification of the pre-existing forms" (Tsuru 1998: 80). It thus might be that *Bolobe*'s 'new' dance movement was spontaneous as Mongi claimed.

Similarly to men initiates, women initiates use a set of performative techniques to create specific visions and sounds during *Dgɔku* performances. Being bound to the secrecy of *Dgɔku*'s initiation, unfortunately I cannot disclose these techniques. I apologise for failing to give descriptions of these techniques, but have a duty to respect the commitments I have given to my Mbendjele informants. All I am able to say is that some spirits' dance movements are initiates' techniques to save energy without interfering with the beauty and flow of a performance.

Despite the fact that forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) sometimes fail or are considered by participants to be of average or poor quality, some performances are highly successful and remain in people's memories as delightful and deeply enjoyable experiences. In the hard earned and cherished moments during which a performance is just right, everyone is cooperating. Women manage to agree on songs and to handle the transitions through the different phases of a performance. Men organize themselves to get the spirits ready at the right time. Drummers must cooperate with both women and spirits and adapt to their actions, as they must have the right tempo at any time and know how and when to end songs.



Spirits and women are in constant interaction and they have to constantly adapt to each other.

In a beautiful performance, participants display positive emotions through smiles, laughter, teasing and enthusiasm. The songs are performed properly as they start at the right tempo, last for the right amount of time and *esime* (song section) are included in between songs at the right time. Girls who sing the *esime* must have voices strong enough to hold it for ten minutes or so –which is a prowess. When one of the *esime* girls is tired, the transition with another girl must be smooth. The spirits have to be dressed properly, as the spirits' clothing must be made of good materials and the design must be personally adapted to each *mokondi*. The intensity and quality of the dancing of men, women and children must be at a high level, and the staging must be right, with enough space for spirits to perform at ease.

The success of a performance is therefore grounded primarily on the participants' good will. As highlighted in chapter 1, one of Mbendjele's core egalitarian principles is that no one can force anyone to do anything, and most of the performative aspects of forest spirit rituals (*mokondi massana*) described above therefore have to be coordinated through persuasion. This chapter showed that forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) are particularly complex performances which necessitate the coordination and engagement of performers' whole bodies, skills and attention. The ethnographic examples also showed that each performance is made unique by the identity of the *mokondi* performing, by the state of current relations between participants, by innovations in songs and dance movements and new variations on familiar themes, and by its level of success.

Despite the uniqueness of each performance, all *Edjɛŋgi* and *Dgɔku* performances are grounded on shared symbolic meanings which define gender roles and relations within Mbendjele's society. This shared symbolic meaning is made explicit in the story of the first performances of *Edjɛŋgi* and *Dgɔku* by Mbendjele's mythical ancestors. In the following section I provide a version of these mythical stories, in order to show how such great diversity in the performance of same-class *mokondi* does not prevent all *Edjɛŋgi* performances and all *Dgɔku* performances to remain equivalent and share common aesthetic principles.

### **Grounding all performances in a continuous path**

As Turner pointed out, “much of the grotesqueness and monstrosity of luminal sacra may be seen to be aimed not so much at terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits as at making them vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called the “factors” of their culture” (Turner 1967: 105). *Edjengi* is a terrifying spirit and yet it sends all sorts of other messages to the performers too. *Edjengi*’s clothing reflects the dual symbolic of fertility and power to deliver death, as *Edjengi*’s leaves which are now so deadly to women used to give them children in the mythical times. The story of the first encounter between men and women offers precious insights into *Edjengi*’s performances. Lewis (2002: 175-177) gave two versions of this myth (a men’s version and a women’s version). Despite variations in the myth, Lewis pointed out that “the basic structure of the myth is remarkably similar between different areas” (*op cit.* 174). The version I collected in Bonguinda obeys this rule and, while having slight differences with Lewis’s version from Southern Mbendjele, has the same basic structure. My translation of this myth comes from several interviews with Mbendjele women and men from Bonguinda and Bangui-Motaba. I combined different versions coming both from men and women I talked to in order to get as much details as possible.

### **The creation myth: the first encounter between men and women**

In the ancient times, men and women were living separately, not knowing about each other’s existence. Men were living in their own village, and would go hunting and collect honey. Women were living in another village, far away from the men’s, and ate wild yams that they collected in the forest. Women had caught the *Edjengi* spirit in the forest. When they would sing, *Edjengi* would come to dance in women’s village. When he danced turning on himself, newborns came out of its leaves, and that is how women use to have babies. The men could not have children. Instead, they would use big nuts (*mapombe*) to have very painful sex. Every night, each man would take his *mapombe* nut in his bed and have sex with it, before emptying it from

the sperm in the morning. The edges of the nut were very sharp, and men would hurt themselves and get wounds and scars on their penis.

One day, the men went hunting in the forest, and one of them, Toli went hunting on his own. He walked a lot, following wild pig tracks. Suddenly, he heard voices from afar, voices from an animal he did not know. He came closer, and arrived at the women's camp. He hid while watching the women. They were singing in ways he never heard before, and he saw *Edjengi* dance and babies fall from its leaves. He watched, surprised and fascinated by the women, until the performance was over and the women went to bed. He came out then, and picked up a leaves skirt left behind by a woman. The skirt's smell excited him very much, and Toli promised himself to come back to this place and learn more about these strange creatures he had met. He left some honey in the middle of the camp as an offering, and then went back to his friends. When he arrived in the men's village, he gathered all his mates. He told them the story of what he had just saw, and convinced the men to go back to the women's village together.

In the mean time, women woke up and found the honey that Toli had left. They were first scared, but one of them, Beponga, was brave enough to taste the honey. It was so sweet and so delicious that she instantly wanted to know how to get some more of this food. Seeing how she seemed to enjoy, other women tried, and they were all seduced by the deliciousness of the honey. The women were still wondering how they could find some more honey when the men arrived. The women were very scared as they had never seen men before. They started running in disorder, fleeing men. The latter were used to hunting though, and easily caught all the women. They were fond of women's smell, and could not resist having sex with them. At the beginning, men wanted several women each, but women refused, and said that one man should have one woman and no more. They all had sex and quickly afterwards women got pregnant and started to give birth to babies.

Men were so happy that they found a nicer way to have sex that they decided to stay with the women. To convince the women to live with them, they offered them honey and meat. Women in return, took pity when they saw how the men use to have painful sex with the *mapombe* nuts. They thus decided to give *Edjengi* to men. As they could have children by having sex with men, they did not need the spirit

anymore. Since then, men and women have lived together, and men are *Edjengi*'s guardians<sup>53</sup>.

This creation myth shows well how women's vagina is one of women's strongest powers over men. Sex is a main reason for men and women to come together, and it is thanks to women's sexual power that the Mbendjele come into being. As I will develop in the following chapter, this partially explains why women always aim at reminding the community of their sexual power during *Dgoku* performances, which can be understood as an assertion of women's sexual power. In the creation myth, the legendary independent aspect of the relationship between genders is strongly affirmed as men and women were both able to live without the other gender, and this aspect of men's and women's past lives is recreated in *Edjengi* performances. *Edjengi* performances' staging offers a way for performers to incarnate the gendered distinctions and the meanings culturally attached to it. During performances, men have to cooperate to keep women safe by standing between them and the spirit, and clearly separate men from the group of women. The staging itself asserts the ancient dichotomy inherent to men/women relationships and yet delivers roles in a way that allows this relationship to create beauty through the performance.

Turner reminds us that "monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships and features of their environments they have hitherto taken for granted" (Turner 1967: 105). Forest spirits appear as sometimes clown-like, sometimes powerful or arrogant, monstrous or crude, and through their aesthetics and actions evoke deep symbolic meanings. The embodiment of these meanings through the action of performing allows performers to assimilate these meanings directly through their bodies, without having to translate these meanings into words.

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<sup>53</sup> It's interesting to note that in the men's version of this creation myth, men steal *Edjengi* from woman. Whereas in women's version, women were glad to let men deal with such a dangerous and strong spirit. Lewis observed similar differences among Southern Mbendjele as he wrote that "the women interpret their gift of *Ejengi* to the men as demonstrating their strength...Men emphasise that they took *Ejengi* by force" (2002: 177)

## The mythical finding of *Dgoku* spirit

As highlighted in several songs from the *Dgoku* repertoire, *Dgoku* is a water spirit. In the story told by the elder woman Kombea, *Dgoku* was found in the water, and that's why this spirit is strongly linked to the rain. When it rains, children enjoy playing outside, and often, girls sing *Dgoku* songs. Even if a *Dgoku* performance is not held consistently every time it rains, it is rare not to hear some young girls go around the village or camp singing songs from the *Dgoku* repertoire. Here is the story of the finding of the *Dgoku* spirit in the ancient times as it has been told by Kombea, an elder woman from Indongo<sup>54</sup>.

Kombea: I will tell you about *Dgoku*.

Women went to catch the *Dgoku* spirit.

With their wisdom, women heard "hummm" in the water, "hummm" in the water. Thanks to their wisdom, as they approached the water women knew that the *Dgoku* spirit was here.

A girl said: "Come on, let's catch *Dgoku*, it is in the water!"

Women said: "*Dgoku* is in the water!"

"hummm, hummm" said the spirit. *Dgoku* was crying in the water.

Women came from a distance and told one girl: "Catch it, we are coming to help you! Catch it!"

A few girls tried to catch *Dgoku* spirit while talking to it: "Where are you going, come with us!"

The girls managed to catch the spirit, and the other women present called the women in the camp: "They caught *Dgoku*! Come here and see!"

Women were very proud of the girls who managed to catch the *Dgoku* spirit. They told the girls: "You are so clever; you caught *Dgoku*, a being of the water! You, the children who caught *Dgoku*, you have more wisdom than us! You caught *Dgoku*!"

Some women could not believe it: "Did you really catch *Dgoku*?"

The girls answered: "Yes, we did, look, here it is."

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<sup>54</sup> I am deeply grateful to Ingrid Lewis, who conducted the interview with Kombea, an old friend of hers in September 2014. Their status as *konja ua mokondi* (spirit-guardians) allowed the two women to talk freely and permitted Kombea to deliver the full story. My Mbendjee being much more faltering and my experience much shorter, I could not have managed to collect such precise accounts. Ingrid's interview was filmed, and she allowed me to use the video to make the translation I provide here.

Women answered: "You, the children, you are wise!"

The girls said: "You, the elders, you thought that we weren't wise. Well look now, we caught *Dgoku*! You couldn't do that!"

Then Beponga, one of the women elders, called the children.

She told them: "Look, this is *Dgoku*'s liana. You will use this on your throats. Did you hear me?"

The children performed *Dgoku* and used *Dgoku*'s voice.

The girls said: "We like it! We like it a lot!"

Women told each other: "Look, today we will sing and dance *Dgoku*!"

The girls went to get the lianas and medicines in the forest and drank it to open their throats. Then they went to catch the spirit, and came back to awake Beponga.

They said: "Beponga, wake up, we are singing and dancing!"

Beponga answered: "I'm coming; I will see your spirit with my own eyes. Let's go."

Beponga danced and danced, and *Dgoku* came again and again. They sang and danced until it was over. The men did not like the performance at all. They started to beat women.

Women said: "Stop beating us! You perform your own spirits, we do our own!"

A man said to his wife: "Come here quickly, I'll have sex with you today!"

The wife answered: "Who do you think you are going to have sex with?"

After a while, people thought it was enough. They separated them, saying: "Stop now, this is over, stop it. Let's dance now. Men, you must leave the women alone. They are performing their thing. Their vaginas aren't going anywhere, leave it for now."

And so the men sat down.

Women went to collect some wild yams, saying: "We will dance again tomorrow."

They collected lots of yams and cleaned them before cooking them. Each woman cooked yams and took them to Beponga so that she could feed *Dgoku*.

As pointed out in this story, teenage girls managed to catch the *Dgoku* spirit. Teenage girls bring the energy to its climax during *Dgoku* performances as they sing with strong, clear and beautiful voices. Likewise, elders are the repository for the magic necessary to *Dgoku* performances. They also direct the performance, letting the teenage girls and children know what to do and when to do it. Every *Dgoku* performance is a re-enactment of the first time it has been performed, and age groups still have the same functions and roles. Men also sometimes re-enact their anger whenever women perform *Dgoku*. Men often ask women to stop performing *Dgoku* and to leave the village or camp in peace, but in Bonguinda women never listened to them. In *Dgoku* performances I participated in, it never happened that men managed to stop women from performing, regardless the strength of their insults, demands or orders.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter described some of the techniques used during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) to create specific emotional atmospheres. Through the analysis of the ways performers interact verbally and non-verbally, the chapter showed how energy is breathed in a performance, and how performers share valued positive emotions provoked by the interactions between the forest spirits and the participants.

The character of each forest spirit is unique, but the range of emotions they invoke focus on establishing profound joy, laughter and a sense of awe at the beauty of the musicking. The ethnography described some of the techniques performers use to get into the emotional states necessary for efficient cooperation and proper sharing of the joy and beauty produced with all present, including the forest. This emotional state is reached through a certain kind of visual and acoustic aesthetics, and the pleasure of performing is dependent on these acoustic and visual criteria being achieved.

The musical aesthetics described in chapter 3, and the visual aesthetics described in this chapter have proven to be powerful and sophisticated tools in the process of

sharing valued positive emotions. The next chapter will investigate further the domain of aesthetics through the analysis of women's spirit performances which actively contribute to the construction of Mbendjele society and show how aesthetics are used by the Mbendjele as a channel for verbal and non-verbal messages to be communicated between genders



**Figure 38:** *Dāmba* spirits: husband, wives and child (Bobanda, June 2014)



**Figure 39:** The *Dāmba* child is encouraged by its *Dāmba* parents to dance (Bobanda, June 2014)



**Figure 40:** *Dāmba* spirit's emblematic dance movement (Bobanda, June 2014)



**Figure 41:** *Ekāmbaleki*'s head is covered by a hunting net (Bobanda, June 2014)



**Figure 42:** *Ekāmbaleki* scares women and children by exhibiting his large penis (Bobanda, June 2014)



**Figure 43:** Some women run away from *Ekāmbaleki* while others try to get close to him (Bobanda, June 2014)





**Figure 44:** At the beginning of a *Bolobe* performance, young girls gather and start singing, helped by a couple of women (*djāmba*) who give them ideas of songs and guide the unfolding of the singing (Bonguinda, December 2013)



**Figure 45:** Bolobe's mother/*Dgoye a Bolobe* (Sendébumu, December 2013)



**Figure 47:** Lumai dances *edyānguma* (Bonguinda, February 2014)





**Figure 48:** *Libongu* . Procession of men carrying *Edjengi*'s leaves (Sendébumu, December 2013)



**Plate 9:** The *Edjengi* spirit (Bonguinda, 2013-2014)





**Plate 10:** *Bandudu* skirts. Men and women can wear the same type of skirts, but they do not wear them in the same way (Bonguinda, 2014)



**Plate 11:** *Bekpadja* is a type of skirt worn by women, and sometimes borrowed by men to use as elements of their *Bolobe mokondj*'s clothing (Bonguinda, 2013-2014)





**Plate 12:** *Bolobe's* clothing is made out of the combination of seven material elements (Bonguinda, 2013-2014)



**Figure 49:** Tokabe weaves a *bandudu* skirt for her cousin Mongi while her little sister Niesi weaves one for herself (Bonguinda, December 2014)



**Figure 50:** Young initiates carry *Libongu* to bring *Edjengi's* leaves (*djongu*) in the *njānga* sacred path (Bonguinda, January 2014)



**Figure 51:** The *Edjengi* performance was organised specifically for young initiates (Bonguinda, January 2014)



## Chapter 5:

### The egalitarian woman

Some aesthetic mechanisms of gender communication in *Dgɔku* performances

“Dance ... functions as a multidimensional phenomenon codifying experience and capturing the sensory modalities: the sight of performers moving in time and space, the sounds of physical movement, the smell of physical exertion, the feeling of kinesthetic activity or empathy, the touch of body to body and/or performing area, and the proxemic sense. In this way, dance has unique potential of going beyond many other audio-visual media of persuasion”

(Hanna 1979: 25-26)

#### Introduction

There are certain things the Mbendjele do not like to talk about in public. Most of *mokondi massana*'s symbolic meaning is only verbalized and made explicit in the secrecy of the *njānga* path, the “preferred place for sharing secret knowledge and forest lore” (Lewis 2002: 147). In public people do not ask questions as it is considered to be rude (Lewis 2008: 297).

Before I was initiated to *Dgɔku*, I was not allowed to see the spirit, even less to participate in *Dgɔku* performances. After my initiation, I was authorized to learn secret knowledge from other women initiates, on the *njānga*, or during intimate moments when women sit in the forest alone and talk freely. In these moments, women share knowledge about how to use ‘telepathy’ to control their husbands and



force them through magical means to love them and not to seek sexual intercourse with other women. Lewis showed that women's hidden knowledge is, among other things, about "using 'sexiness' to control and manage men, maintaining fertility, safe childbirth, and healthy child rearing" (Lewis 2014: 236). Yet in addition to the practical and magical techniques of 'safe' and 'healthy' pregnancy and child-birth, women share stories about women's power and extraordinary ability to receive and nurture life. *Konja ua mokondi* teach initiates the processes by which children come into women's bellies<sup>55</sup>.

Some key issues of women's power and secret ability to control men are thus made explicit and shared through verbal communication. Other issues however, are not verbalized, and are not meant to be. I once asked Ai to tell me explicitly what *Dgɔku* was doing to women during performances. Ai stayed silence for a while, and then told me: "We will do *Dgɔku* again soon, you will see what it does." I thus realised that certain things have to be experienced to be understood, and Mbendjele do not put words on things that do not need them.

The emotional experience created by the performance cannot be translated into words. Bourdieu talks about those "thoughts or things that lie outside or anterior to speech" (Bourdieu 1990: 71), and Mbendjele value non-verbal communication as much as words. When it comes to collective emotions, the emphasis is put on experience, on the *doing* rather than on the *saying*,

Building on Jackson (1998), Finnegan showed that "the fact that such rituals do not generate much verbal reflexion is their whole point. They are practical, somatogenic knowledge, belonging to a common communicative fund broader than the conceptual or linguistic." (Finnegan 2008: 169). The exaggeration of women's solidarity in *Dgɔku* performances creates a sense of power and strength that lives inside bodies, and that does not make sense as a verbalised form. *Dgɔku* is about learning to be a mother and a wife, and about learning to acknowledge and control your magical force. But it is also about learning to connect with other women through the sharing of collective emotions, about how to project and receive positive energy and transform into a gendered collective being that enchants the world and builds Mbendjele society.

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<sup>55</sup> I provide examples in chapter 1.

Intra-gender solidarity is a key aspect of *Dgɔku* performances and of Mbendjele women's lives. Hrdy (2009) was the first to introduce the concept of female agency as an active force of the social space through her work on allo-mothering and maternal co-operation. Her fascinating book showed, among other things, that in hunter-gatherer societies women's solidarity is crucial to the resilience of the group due to humanity's dependence on collective child rearing.

Since some of the collective processes defining gender roles within Mbendjele society are not meant to be verbalised but embodied, the mechanisms by which this ideology is transmitted are to be found in the "egalitarian aesthetic of gendered interaction" (Lewis 2014: 236). The detailed ethnographic descriptions I provide in this chapter offer a direct account of what happens to bodies during *Dgɔku* performances. Finnegan found that "egalitarianism in BaAka contexts is a relationship rather than a static term, within which there is continual bargaining and disputation." (Finnegan 2008: 137). The fantastic impression of power and strength I experienced during *Dgɔku* performances gave me a concrete sense of how the Mbendjele ideology of gender is deeply imbedded in women's bodies. *Dgɔku* performances have many repercussions that affect the Mbendjele society as a whole, while being strictly circumscribed to the 'world of *massana*' (*mokili ua massana*) and bound to its artistic ways of communicating. By looking at the body in the context of *Dgɔku* performances as "the creative matrix of ritual action" (Finnegan 2008: 145), I explain the performative mechanisms which allow gender communication.

This chapter thus focuses on *Dgɔku* and explores its multiple facets since *Dgɔku* is both a forest spirit (*mokondi*) and a performative aesthetic concept of gendered power through laughter and cooperation. It is also a way of bringing to life a gendered 'speaking body' (Finnegan 2008: 146) and "a means of *creating* society" (*ibid.*, original emphasis). Beginning with an analysis of the lyrics of *Dgɔku* performances the chapter identifies the four main themes emphasised by performers: power, sex, laughter and solidarity. Several case-studies of *Dgɔku* performances then define the aesthetic processes allowing gender communication. Detailed ethnographic descriptions demonstrate the uniqueness of each *Dgɔku mokondi* and show the extent to which *mokondi*'s identities influence the aesthetics of *Dgɔku* performances and condition its message.

### Power, sex, laughter and solidarity

*Dgɔku* is one of woman's spirits (*mokondi*), and is only performed by initiate women. Men can only be observers, and they are not allowed in *Dgɔku*'s sacred area (*njānga*). Although they all belong to the same class of spirits, each *Dgɔku mokondi* has its specificities since some of them are shy and others are very clown-like. Some come to dance in villages while others prefer the secrecy of the forest. Still the themes tackled in songs' lyrics are common to all *Dgɔku mokondi*. *Dgɔku* is depicted as a powerful being, hard but provider of great joy. The mythical origin of *Dgɔku* is referred to, and several songs emphasise that this is a women's spirit. The tables below gather the songs which assert *Dgɔku*'s characteristics (table 4 to 7).

Two of the songs ("*Dgɔku* is a water animal" and "She goes get her spirit in the water") tell parts of the mythical story of *Dgɔku*'s finding by women as Kombea related it (see chapter 4). Great differences in the aesthetics of *Dgɔku* performances exist between the Southern Mbendjele of the Sangha region and the Mbendjele of the Motaba River in the Likouala region as I will demonstrate shortly. Yet the symbolic meaning associated to *Dgɔku* is common to both groups. *Dgɔku* was found by women and women control it ("*Dgɔku* is our [women] matter"). *Dgɔku* is and makes women powerful ("*Dgɔku* gives, *Dgɔku* takes, *Dgɔku* gets"), although it is a peaceful being ("*Dgɔku* doesn't have teeth").

<i>Li Dgɔku adie nyama ya mai</i>	<i>Dgɔku</i> is a water animal
<i>Adwa bese molimo āngwi ya mai</i>	She goes to get her spirit in the water
<i>Dgɔku uete na mino</i>	<i>Dgɔku</i> doesn't have teeth [i.e. <i>Dgɔku</i> is not dangerous]
<i>Dgɔku kaba, Dgɔku bosa, Dgɔku ma</i>	<i>Dgɔku</i> gives, <i>Dgɔku</i> takes, <i>Dgɔku</i> gets
<i>Dgɔku adie moto a esengo</i>	<i>Dgɔku</i> is a being of joy
<i>Dgɔku angusu mendo</i>	<i>Dgɔku</i> is our [women's] matter
<i>Li Dgɔku adie nyama a bude</i>	<i>Dgɔku</i> is a hard animal
<i>Molimo</i>	Spirit
<i>Ekoselē</i>	[Name of a famous and powerful <i>Dgɔku mokondi</i> ]
<i>Nyama keye</i>	The animal went away
<i>Dgɔku etina bapai</i>	Name of constitutive parts of a mat [i.e. <i>Dgɔku</i> is women's matter]

**Table 4:** *Dgɔku* song lyrics (Bonguinda, April 2013- July 2014)

Other *Dgɔku* songs are tools which reinforce women's solidarity during a performance. From elders to young initiates, all women are called by the spirit. These songs are made to encourage every women to join, in order to demonstrate solidarity and to improve the efficacy of a performance. The more people participate to a *Dgɔku* performance the better, and these songs are specifically designed to attract women and invite them to join a performance (see table 5).

Bonguinda	<i>Yaya</i>	Big sister
	<i>Eita mama</i>	We call you elders
IIndongo/ Bonguinda	<i>Dga</i>	Girlfriends [are called to join the performance]

**Table 5:** *Dgɔku* song lyrics (Bonguinda, April 2013- July 2014, Indongo September 2014)

Many *Dgɔku* songs assertively undermine men's ability to dominate by insulting them and making fun of their sexual weaknesses. Finnegan commented on songs insulting men such as those listed in table 6 and argued that when women 'danced' the words they were reinforcing women's 'coalitionary voice' (Finnegan 2008: 140). The "ideological rivalry between the sexes" (ibid: 141) is stated by women and exaggerated to increase its effects.

<b>Bonguinda</b>	<i>Eloko sapa baketi</i>	Penis [men] should wear trainers
	<i>Modiambi amoena na yobe</i>	The liana [penis] got cut with a knife
	<i>Eloko lala</i>	The penis sleeps
	<i>Bene badieba pia li Dgɔku</i>	They [men] don't know how to perform <i>Dgɔku</i>
<b>Indongo</b>	<i>Eloko asa binye</i>	The penis is peeing
	<i>Bato, eloko akwanaka</i>	People, the penis gets flabby
	<i>Eloko vai</i>	Where is the penis?

**Table 6:** *Dgɔku* song lyrics (Bonguinda, April 2013- July 2014, Indongo September 2014)

Lewis argued that "by singing together, each gender group reinforces its message to the other gender, and repetition strengthens the point rather than annoying or tiring listeners as it would if spoken" (Lewis 2014: 237). The aesthetics of *Dgɔku* performances are therefore crucial to allow the message to be communicated without leading to violence. The relationships between men and women are also explored in *Dgɔku* songs (see table 7).

<i>Yoma embānda mobe</i>	Food is a complicated matter in polygamy
<i>Masa tuba me</i>	Young man, pierce me
<i>Boliŋgɔ</i>	Love
<i>Embɔŋgi</i>	[a pregnant woman wags her head after sexual intercourse]

**Table 7:** *Dgɔku* song lyrics (Bonguinda, April 2013- July 2014)

Finnegan argued that “laughter, synchrony, polyphony and Eros – the carnivalistic experience of dance and song – are how the individual reproductive body is ‘cooked’ by the collective” (Finnegan 2008: 143), although she also admitted that “remarkably little is known about *Dgɔku*” (*ibid.*: 142). While the four elements of the symbolic meanings of *Dgɔku* performances (laughter, sex, power and gender solidarity) have been identified by Lewis (2002) and Kisliuk (1998), and rendered explicit by Finnegan (2008), only a few descriptions exist in the literature. How are individuals’ bodies ‘cooked’ by the collective in *Dgɔku* performances? The next section provides descriptions that will throw light on the effect of specific aesthetic tools and mechanisms that cook women’s bodies during *Dgɔku*.

### **The aesthetics of women’s expression and assessment of their power as a gender**

The highlight is not on the individual during *Dgɔku* performances, but rather on the group’s capacity to communicate as a gender group. Lewis explored the polyphonic nature of Mbendjele communication, and showed that “the variety of sounds and actions that make up the entire ‘vocabulary’ of Mbenjee may be better understood as something broad and all-embracing- a tool for enabling Mbendjele to communicate effectively with anything and anyone that will respond” (Lewis 2006: 6). During *massana* activities, Mbendjele express group identities through dancing together, singing and drama. Their communication tool-box contains much more than words.

In *Dgɔku* performances, women use all the available space in the village or camp to communicate with men, show them how powerful they can be when getting all together, like a threat that refrains men from trying any controlling action over them. Just as men show off their strength in other rituals like *So* or *Edjɛngi*, women use *Dgɔku* performances to make sure no gender group is going to break the delicate balance of egalitarianism. Turnbull pointed out about the Mbuti’s *ekokomea* ritual that

“as groups of women and men are able to ridicule the opposite sex, most often in terms of sexual behaviour and cleanliness... until the ridicule itself

goes so far beyond the realm of reason that aggressivity itself becomes unthinkable” (Turnbull 1978: 215).

The process of expressing and resolving tensions through burlesque is a key to the understanding of Mbendjele forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). The following ethnographic vignette demonstrates that intra-gender solidarity is conditioned by aesthetic elements in *Dgɔku* performances and that humour is used to assert women's power and to send messages to the community.

### **Women's power and solidarity in the performance of Modiembe's *Dgɔku mokondi* (Embɔndɔ)**

In April 2014, *Dgɔku* had not been performed for more than a week in Bonguinda. An elder woman complained one evening. Without talking to anyone in particular, she said: “*Dgɔku* is not in here. It is bad, right?” (*Dgɔku uete va! Ebe ta!*). Since filling the village with “good sounds” (nice singing, laughter, joy) is the main goal of most *massana* activities, as a rule of thumb its production should be one of people's priorities in everyday life<sup>56</sup>. A few other women elders made supportive comments that evening, insisting on the fact that women should perform *Dgɔku* the next day. A few young initiates listened to their elder's advice, and got up to deliver their message in the village and make sure enough women would join them to sing *Dgɔku* the next morning. They just went for a few minutes around the village, six or seven girlfriends singing songs from the *Dgɔku* repertoire that call the spirit and invite her to come and perform (see lyrics in above section).

The next morning, a good bunch of women were up and ready as soon as the sun light appeared. The sky was cloudy, and rain began with a light drizzle. They quickly gathered and went to their sacred tree (*njānga*), a few minutes' walk in the forest, away from the village. When they came back, they started to go around their neighborhood, singing *Dgɔku* songs and playing its specific rhythm.

Women started singing a song intended to call out the *mokondi* spirit, and to invite it to come and dance with them (‘*Dgɔku* is our [women's] matter’, *Dgɔku angusu mendo*). They also sang a song which invites other women to join the performance

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<sup>56</sup> This view has been explained in chapters 1 and 2.

(‘elder sister’, *Yaya*). As the women gather their friends with this song, they start to create a gendered communion and solidarity which is a key tool to maintain the cohesion of the group during *Dgoku* performances. After a while, the spirit eventually called back and came out.

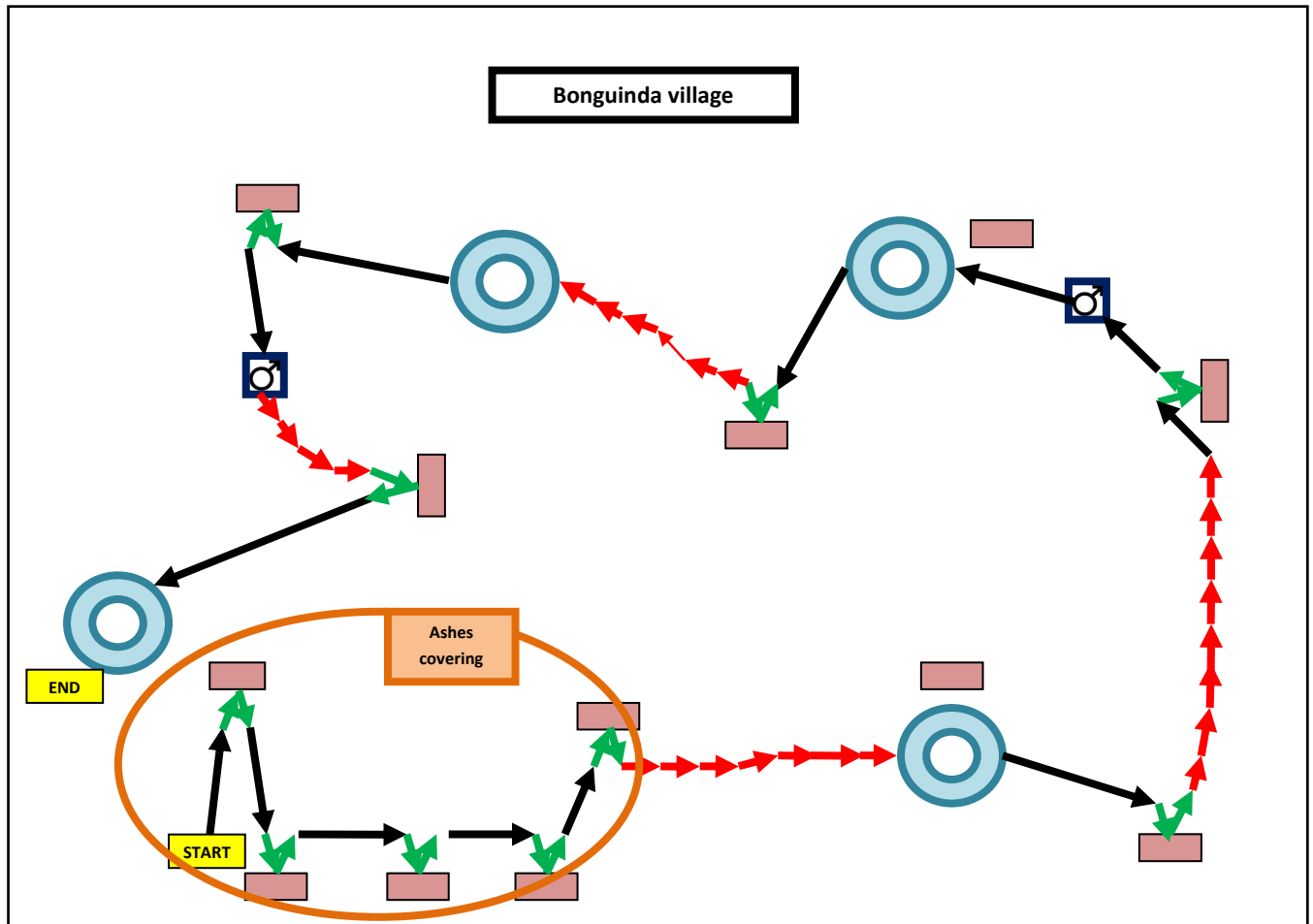
Modiembe was a woman with a great sense of humor. She did not hesitate to make jokes or to mock people around her in everyday life as she was very good at mimicking behaviors and at making people laugh. To call her *Dgoku mokondi* named Embondo, she started to take her clothes off, -which made all the girls laugh- until she was wearing nothing but her panties. Slowly, she modified the way she was moving to adopt comic movements. She began to put on a funny face, smiling lips tightly closed, and head down. A clever sparkle in her eyes, she started to move around just like a drunkard, pretending to fall at each step, falling on the women around her, changing the rhythm of her movements in unexpected ways that had a great comical effect. As she was getting more and more funny, women around her became hilarious, and the laughter incited more and more women to join. She was moving in a weird position, her knees lightly bended, her arms dangling along her body, and her neck motionless.

When enough women were around, Embondo decided that it was time to go on around the village. Women around it started to sing while following. Embondo was deciding what to do or where to go, and at first women followed it obediently. Bit by bit, Modiembe covered her *mokondi*’s body with ashes, using the fires of her friends in the houses around hers. After visiting five or six houses, Embondo’s body was completely covered with ashes, which made it completely white<sup>57</sup>.








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<sup>57</sup> Some men spirits such as *Dāmba* or *Bolobe* (see chapter 4) can have the same aspect, almost naked and their whole body covered in ashes.

**Figure 53:** Embondo's performance staging and unfolding.



**Legend:**

-  Women run faster, beating the ground with feet rhythmically while singing.
-  Women advance slowly, following the spirit.
-  The spirit goes visiting the inhabitants of a house, and might encourage the women inside to come and join the performance or try to steal something.
-  Women stop and play a game, usually including a round dance.
-  House
-  A man is summoned to join women's performance to play the drums for them.
-  At the beginning of the performance, the spirit appears little by little as Modiembe covers her *Dgoku mokondi's* body with ashes from her friend's fireplaces.



Modiembe's co-wife was *Dgɔku*'s guardian, and was making sure the spirit was not hurting anyone. Indeed, as and when the performance was taking shape, Embondo was becoming more and more out of control.

The spirit jumped in all directions, pretending to fall on people, onto the floor or on the walls of houses. It would start running in a weird way, its arms hanging down its body, and all of a sudden it would stop and turn to go in another direction. Embondo hit the men who had the misfortune to be on its way, and women had to protect onlookers from the unpredictability of the spirit. From time to time, Embondo went inside houses, and snatched things that it would find (e.g. bananas, palm nuts or clothes) from the house's inhabitants. The latter would let the spirit take what they had, sometimes trying to rescue at least a piece of whatever it was snatching. The victims would sometimes laugh, sometimes be angry and blame women, but in the end they would always submit themselves to Embondo's will. *Dgɔku*'s guardian was carrying a small basket, which she used to collect whatever Embondo was gathering from her visits to the houses.

A man did something significant when Embondo came to his house and pretended to snatch something from inside, dancing around the man's plot and creating a mess. He shouted from behind his house, half-hidden, asking the spirit to go away. Women laughed at him, seeing that he was afraid to come closer, and it was indeed very funny to see this man who was obviously very upset by *Dgɔku*'s performance and yet did not dare to come and physically evict the spirit from his plot. Despite his demands, the spirit ignored him and kept dancing in his plot until it decided to move on.

During this performance, Embondo recruited a couple of men to take care of the drums. Both of them were young men who did not intend to take part in the women's performance. One of them had just returned from hunting in the forest, and had to quickly leave his belonging with someone as he was forced to join women and their *Dgɔku*. These men were mistreated and heckled by Embondo, its guardian, and a few other women, before a plastic container was put into their hands. They became an active part of the performance as women took the two men with them, keeping them close and giving them instructions as to the rhythms they wanted.

These young men were apparently impressed by both Embondo's and the women's strength, and did not dare to protest. They let women beat them quite heavily, without an ounce of open disapproval, and kept their heads down, not daring to even look at Embondo. I was impressed by the way men immediately submitted themselves to women's will, as they were both very strong young men, whom I had seen fight fiercely on other occasions. They almost looked like lost children, submissive and shy in front of the *Dgoku* spirit, and this situation contrasted a lot with the way these same men behaved in everyday life.

Young Mbendjele men can seem very strong when they wish to, as in men's forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) such as *So* or *Bolobe*. Though when *Dgoku* took them into the performance, their masculinity was subdued, as they went docilely along, weak and powerless, simply following women's orders. From time to time, the procession of women would stop, and Embondo would propose a game. The spirit's propositions were not always followed by the women, and often the spirit had no choice but to submit to the will of the teenage girls. Embondo would also ask individuals to do something specific, but often girls were too shy to do what they were asked. Interestingly Embondo always chose the shyer girls.

At one moment, Embondo asked women to gather around and to sing a *Pfembe* song she initiated<sup>58</sup>. Then, she pointed at a young girl, and asked her to perform a *Pfembe* dance movement in the middle of the round, while women were singing and clapping hands in rhythm. The girl was too shy to obey, and despite the support of her girl friends, she refused to dance. Women kept trying to convince her by shouting encouragements or by physically pushing her into the space in the middle of them. At one point, the pressure was too great for her, and the girl ran away from the round. This made everyone laugh out loud, and Embondo picked another young girl to dance. Just like the first girl, timidity made her run away. No one pursued her, and after a few minutes mocking the two girls' behavior, a teenager came in the middle and did a short choreography while the others were singing. One by one, girls came in the middle to dance for a few minutes, before picking another one to replace them and dance.

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<sup>58</sup> *Pfembe* is a game played by girls. I provide a description in chapter 2.

After a while, and when they were sure that the attention had gone away from them, the two shy girls came back, and one agreed to come and dance in the middle. Seeing her friends dance had made her feel confident enough to give it a try, and her smile showed how proud of her success she was. When she was done dancing, she tried to convince the first shy girl to follow her steps, but failed.

After a few hours, it was still raining, but in a light way that was more refreshing than anything. Most of the young women of the village were now part of the performance, and all the singing, the dancing, the running and the laughing had created an electric ambiance amongst women. This can sometimes be a problem in forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) as young women have difficulty in restraining their excess energy. They were eager to do more running and laughing, while Embondo was moving at a measured pace, and would often stop to play games or to perform some funny movements and interact with the villagers.

Teenage girls detached from the main group of women gathered around Embondo, and went their own way. They started to provoke the elder women by singing a different song as loud as they could when passing them by. They chose modern songs learnt with *Bilo* children, which contrasted with the more traditional and ancient songs from *Dgoku's* repertoire elder women were singing. Women did not pay so much attention to teenage girls but they deplored the way their performance was disordered. What women disapproved of was not so much that teenage girls had decided to do something else, but the fact that they did not do it properly. Women just sang louder when teenage girls would pass by at an impressive speed, stomping their feet on the ground at unison. "You just mess around! Please, do *Dgoku* properly!" (*Bune kia kili-kili! Kia li Dgoku na ndonda pardon*[French]!).

When the girls had detached, their group was pulsing with Embondo's energy, and they were glowing with joy, stomping the ground in a perfect unison, creating a breeze as they ran. But soon they became confused because of their uncertainty, and they were missing the leadership of an older initiate to guide them and make things happen.

Embondo went its own way followed by most women, and its performance was very organized despite its unpredictability, and initiates were disciplined. For every choice of songs, women discussed various possibilities before unanimously agreeing on

one. The songs chosen were sung for several minutes, so that some interesting variations and improvised melodies could develop. When women were dancing, their choreography was ordered as they coordinated their dance movements. The performance was fluid, as each transition from one event to another (song, game, joke and interaction) was smooth, maintaining the fluidity of the performance.

Teenage girls' performance was disordered because they did not manage to coordinate themselves. They just ran as fast as they could, but then did not really know what to do next, and so went on for more running, without even singing sometimes. It soon became obvious to them that just running around was not so funny after all. Since their lack of discipline was taking away all the joy and laughter, they came back to Embondo. Teenage girls had failed to make sense of their performance, and were attracted to women's laughter and Embondo's comical behaviour. When they came back to the main group of initiates performing with Embondo, no one made any critical comments about their brief getaway and they were welcomed back without a word.

After going around each of Bonguinda's neighbourhoods, women arrived in front of a *Bilo* couple, who were hosted by an Mbendjele family to do some fishing in the nearby forest. Bonguinda is unusual for being a strictly Mbendjele village, and no *Bilo* live there permanently. Most Mbendjele spend part of the year in *Bilo* villages, which have separated *Bilo* and Mbendjele neighborhoods. This *Blo* couple was only there for a few days. As women arrived, the *milo* woman came out of the house to admire Embondo's performance. She laughed for a while, before going inside the house to pick up a baby cardigan that she gave to Embondo as an offering. The latter took the little cardigan, and put it on its head, making a knot with the sleeves under its chin. The cardigan made Embondo appear even funnier, and after dancing around for a while, Embondo went away, followed by initiates.

At one point, women gathered in a circle, singing, and Embondo danced in the center. Then the spirit took off its panties, and continued dancing and moving around. Teenage girls started laughing out loud, making fun of the naked Embondo. Embondo's guardian did not appreciate the way girls laughed, and stopped dancing immediately, shouting at the girls. Embondo ordered all the girls who had laughed at *Dgoku's* nakedness to pay a fine of one beaded bracelet. Girls stopped laughing,

and each of them paid the fine. Embondo's guardian made sure each girl had paid before the performance could go on. Ai, a new grand-mother, made a point by getting naked as well and dancing around with the spirit. "*Dgɔku* does not know shame!" (*Dgɔku uete na soni te!*) she shouted while dancing. Then Embondo got naked again, and danced a bit while initiates were singing, and it made sure no one would dare to laugh at its nakedness again.

To end the performance, women gathered at one end of the village, and used a branch stuck in the ground to assemble all women's body decorations made of leafs, seasonal flowers and lianas. Once all the decorations were on the branch, a few women took the branch to the forest, so that Embondo could go back to its world. The spirit was gone, which marked the end of the performance.

After that, the performance itself had ended but things were not over. In the evening, Modiembe went to talk with some of the women who had participated to *Dgɔku*'s performance. She told them that because Embondo had danced so well, we would have to feed it. The next day, some women went to collect edible leaves, while other went digging for wild yams or collecting palm nuts. At the end of the day, several cooking pots were full of food, and ready to be shared with all the women who had participated the day before. Men who had helped by playing the drums also received their share of food. The sharing was done very carefully and seriously. Every initiate who participated in the performance was called to get a share of food, without missing anyone.

Women's power is strongly asserted in Embondo's performances as men have to openly submit to the spirit's will. The *Dgɔku* spirit is allowed, for the time of the performance, to steal goods and personal space, to make fun of men and to use physical violence against them. Women's supremacy is expressed, or rather vindicated since during the performance described above, several men tried to stop the performance by overcoming their fear of the spirit enough to state their discontent. Each time, *Dgɔku* continued to perform despite the insults, threats and orders given by men to stop the performance. Throughout the performance, the women's supremacy was never effectively challenged by the opposite gender. The

thrill of Embondo's performances resides in its extraordinary capacity to make women feel powerful, almost invincible.

In Embondo's performance, the teenage girls experienced this when then tried to perform without the spirit and the rest of the initiates. They tried to enjoy the thrill of the performance without being united with the spirit. This cannot happen. The performative elements of *Dgoku* do not permit any success without a strong intra-gender unity, cohesion and support within the group of initiates. Solidarity is the pillar of co-ordination, and co-ordination is the key of *Dgoku* performances' success (and of all forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*)). Solidarity is unavoidable and necessary to allow women's message to go through as it is because women are united that their message can be considered as collective.

While solidarity and the performative mechanisms it provokes are common to every *Dgoku* performances, the message sent to the other gender and to the community as a whole can vary, and is intrinsically linked to the personality of the *Dgoku mokondi* performing. Embondo is known among women to be a very strong *Dgoku mokondi* as demonstrated by the girls getting over-energised by it, and troublesome but gigantic in its ability to build up women's power over men and to assert it with great humour. Makuba is a quite different *Dgoku mokondi*. Like Embondo, Makuba is embodied individually, but has a very different character.

### **'The gift of joy': Makuba's performance**

*Dgoku mokondi* are not all as clownish as Modiembe's, and only some of them snatch things from people. Ai's *Dgoku mokondi* (Makuba) is much gentler, and mostly concerned about bringing profound happiness to people. Like her *Dgoku mokondi*, Ai's personality is very gentle. Happy in marriage, Ai is the proud mother of seven children, and recently became grand-mother when her first born had a son. She is a very loving woman, and always manages to stay out of arguments. Women often come to consult her when they do not manage to resolve conflicts. Ai and her husband are much respected in the community as they very rarely fight and always offer good advice.

The day Ai decided to initiate me to her *Dgoku mokondi* she had informed everyone the day before. Very early in the morning, a few women came by to take their instructions from Ai. She sent them in the forest, to *Dgoku's* sacred tree, in order to make the magical preparations. When they came back, most of them were wearing seasonal flowers on their head (see plate 14). In the meantime, Ai and Nyemu had arranged to get some palm wine and made me drink a couple of glasses to give me some courage. When women came back from the forest, we all sat down, and Ai explained how I had behaved since I was living with them. She talked mainly about my abilities to live in the forest. She told them about the way I gathered lots of wood to keep the fire going when we were in a fishing camp. During the rainy season, we had caught many fish using big dams, and the fish had to be dried above the fire, and large amounts of fire wood were necessary. She also told them about my ability to find wild yams, and how she had been impressed by the quantity of fish I was able to catch during fishing trips.

Once she had explained everything, women took me in and made me go around the village among them, singing *Dgoku* songs and dancing around. As I had been initiated to Mungwo's *Dgoku mokondi* in a forest camp, I had already learned *Dgoku* songs and dance steps. Makuba was leading the procession, indicating to us what we should do and when.

Makuba's performance was very different from Embondo's. It led women through pretty much the same route, but it neither tried to beat anyone or to steal anything. Instead, it spent more time in front of each house, visiting all the elder women, and inviting them to stop whatever they were doing for a few minutes and join the dance. While women were singing loudly, gathered in round, the elder would make a personal choreography, infected by the spirit's good humor and impressively communicative smile. The elder women Makuba was visiting often made benedictions, by spiting on the spirit and on other women, or by picking up some light branches (*mbundje*), and softly slapping young women's legs. This is a way for elder women to reinforce women's dance, as by slapping their legs they give the legs more energy for the dance (*kose*). Each elder woman we visited also made her own *Dgoku mokondi* heard, so that I could hear them all. I noticed that each *Dgoku mokondi* had her own personal way of dancing, talking and interacting with people.

Each clan's *Dgoku mokondi* was specific and had a distinct personality, while also being distinctively '*Dgoku*'.

While Embondo's performance was more about having great fun and building solidarity between initiates, Makuba's performance was full of intense joy, and the performance seemed to be spreading love all around as I could see men smiling and enjoying the *Dgoku* performance. Makuba was less troublesome than Embondo, in the sense that women were much calmer, and the energy was not the same. In Makuba's performance, women were disciplined, united and loving. As Embondo's tricks and comical effects tended to turn teenage girls into an electric state, they were more willing to create some funny mess in the village. That is how the spirit lost the performance's control at one point, when teenage girls separated from the main group and went their own way. They could not restrain the amount of energy they had gathered during the performance. Makuba was more gentle, and not a single man made commentaries or objections. At the beginning of the performance, they all went away, observing from inside their houses or in the forest.

After a while visiting all the elder women, we took a break and the women smoked cigarettes. Initiates who did not have any bodily ornaments picked up some seasonal flowers and arranged them on their heads, hips and arms. We were now all beautifully decorated. That's when an argument passed by. A man was angry as he noticed that someone had stolen some of his plantain bananas (*makondo*). As he did not know who took them, he walked around the village randomly chopping down banana trees on his way, saying that if he could not eat bananas, then no one would. Even so, he did not disturb the general atmosphere or influence the good emotions spread out by *Dgoku*'s performance. People told him to stop, and accused him of wanting to "steal" *Dgoku*'s performance (*moto aiba massana!*). Both men and women did not pay attention to him, and the incident soon ended.

After visiting all the elder women's houses, the women took me in the forest, to *Dgoku*'s sacred tree. Unfortunately, I cannot talk about what happened there, as it concerns secret knowledge. To seal of my status as an initiated woman, I had to embody the spirit as we came back to the village. Women surrounded my spirit and sang loudly so its voice was heard in the village. Ai's mother accompanied us dancing and singing, leading the spirit and initiates.



The performance had gone for a few hours, and it was getting pretty hot. Women thus decided to stop for the time being, but everyone was in a very good mood and willing to keep doing *massana*. We sat down together in the shades of a lemon tree, and performed *diānga*, a woman's dance with specific movements and songs. We were laughing a lot, and some of the elder women were making everyone laugh by the way they would dance in a comic way (see figure 54). Seeing that the *Dgoku* performance was over, some men came to us, saying that I deserved a proper performance, and they asked why we had stopped so quickly. Women answered that it was getting too hot to keep dancing around, and that we would keep going in the evening, and indeed we performed *Dgoku* that evening, until quite late in the night.

It has been highlighted by scholars working among hunter-gatherer groups in Central Africa (Lewis, Kisliuk, Finnegan, Devische, Turnbull) that the sexual tension built up during spirit rituals is an integral part of performances. Lewis says that the "central theme of much public *Dgoku massana* is explicitly sexual or to do with women's reproductive skills" (Lewis, 2002: 194). My experience in Bonguinda leads me to temper Lewis's assertion, since as described in the above ethnographic vignettes, some *Dgoku mokondi* can be much more concerned about joy, love and women's emotional communion. Sexual power is nonetheless an important part of the ideology of gender underlying *Dgoku* performances, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

### **The showcase of sexuality**

Finnegan has a very insightful way of describing sexually oriented *Dgoku* performances. Using Kisliuk's, Lewis's and Turnbull's ethnographies, she found that "by a concerted, circumscribed mockery of each others' biological selves, of sex and sexual bodies, the core 'social' issue is flagged out and overturned in one move" (Finnegan 2008: 134). Using Bergson's definition of comic and laughter (Bergson 1911), Finnegan argued that in the Aka and Mbuti context women's rituals are the "announcement and power of female controlled reproductive appetite and body" as

well as the “refraction back at men of the pantomime of sex and sexual identity” (*ibid.*: 135).

In some occasions, and especially when many teenage girls participate in a performance, *Dgoku massana* can take the form of a sexual lesson. During a *Dgoku* performance in Indongo in September 2014, Mbendjele women used branches to carve penis and carried them between their legs, mimicking men’s erection (see figure 55). They also mimicked sexual intercourse as they lay on the ground while more women were singing loudly above them (see figure 56). Women also used leaves and herbs to mimic the sperm ejaculating. The lyrics of the songs performed in these performances were very explicit, and mocked the sexual act and men’s weaknesses (“Penis only have urine”, *eloko asa binye*). Women made fun of the way men’s penis become all flabby after the orgasm, whereas women are still ready to have sex after intercourse. Some songs’ lyrics refer to this weakness (“the vagina beats the penis”, *enyeke gagné* [French]).

These kinds of *Dgoku* performances can be offensive to men, though there is nothing they can do to prevent women from insulting them the way they do. Just as men have their own way to send messages to women in some of their performances like *Libonngu* or *Sɔ*<sup>59</sup>, women use *Dgoku* performances to mock and make fun of men’s weaknesses. They emphasize their sexual supremacy over men through such performances.

As Finnegan pointed it out, the way Mbendjele woman (and other Central African Pygmies) perform “... is directly connected to their collective control over their reproductive and sexual energy” (Finnegan 2009: 31). Women emphasize their supremacy over men concerning reproduction, as they are the ones who give birth to children. As it is highlighted in the creation myth<sup>60</sup>, men could not reproduce before they encountered women. Sexual energy is considered by the Mbendjele to be one of women’s greatest powers and *Dgoku* performances are occasions constructed to show it off. The eroticism staged in *Dgoku* performances is a living proof of women’s power to enchant the world with their sexiness and to lure forest spirits in the human space to bring joy, beauty and harmony.

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<sup>59</sup> Because one has to be initiated to know intimately a *mokondi*, my knowledge of men’s *mokondi* will always be truncated.

<sup>60</sup> The story of the mythical encounter between men and women is provided in chapter 4

This female supremacy is explicitly stated as a sexual power in *Dgoku* performances. In Bonguinda, elder women sometimes use their vaginas to scare toddlers, running toward them while exposing their crotch. Children are exposed early to the idea that women use their sexuality as a muscle which can potentially control men.

The aggressiveness and urge of the message delivered by both gender groups during forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) needs burlesque to be accepted as such. The tension created between men and women cannot be resolved without the use of ridicule going “far beyond the realm of reason” (Turnbull 1978: 215). Forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) are simultaneously expressing a conflict between the sexes and offering the tools that resolve the underlying frictions. “This is not mere theatre. These are real bodies, real agencies, people moving through webs of relationships who stand, with the loss of the dialectic of power, to lose authority over their own and their children’s bodies” (Finnegan 2008: 136).

To avoid open conflict between groups, Mbendjele use humour, burlesque and a set of antics to communicate demands, advice or reprimands from one gender group to the other. According to Lewis (pers. com., 2015), some *Dgoku* performances in which women openly mocks men’s sexuality are intended to educate men. The apparently shocking lyrics of the songs displayed (*eloko akwanaka; eloko lala* “the penis gets flabby; the penis is sleeping”) are in fact advices given to men about the way they should make love to women to ensure her pleasure as well as their own. Using the codes of the performances, women can express much more than what they could have done using only verbal communication. The dance movements, singing and collectiveness of *Dgoku*’s body allow them to say things beyond words.

The polyphonic nature of communication among Mbendjele communities allows them to communicate as a gender group, though giving the individual the opportunity to feel powerful. As an initiate I participated in dozens of *Dgoku* performances. What struck me during these performances is the confidence that is built up among women as the performance unfolds. When women manage to stay coordinated and to deliver beautiful singing and dancing, as well as lots of laughter, taking the whole central space for them-selves, women experience how powerful they can be when

doing something together.. As Lewis puts it, “[*Dgoku*] teach women where their power in society lies and how to use it” (Lewis 2002: 194).

During the ephemeral moment of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), men and women use the ritualized theatre of spirit play in turn to take- power over the other gender group. A gender group’s domination is ephemeral and only possible within the delimited space of ‘the world of *massana*’ (*mokili wa massana*). Lewis showed that *massana* “celebrate gender and emphasise independence yet interdependence, antagonism yet desire, separation and unity, subversion and respect, and the management of their relations by same-sex solidarity and taunt and praise, or shaming and loving” (Lewis 2002: 196). This echoes Turner’s concept of multivocality of rituals (Turner 1967: 50). *Dgoku* performances bear a plethora of meanings and forms which intertwine gender solidarity, sexual power, conflict and tremendous joy in the ephemeral moment of the performance.

### **Men’s role in *Dgoku* performances**

*Dgoku* performances allow women to assert their power and position in Mbendjele society. Although men appear to be forced to accept women’s take-over, they in fact actively participate in the construction of women’s power and solidarity. The ethnography presented in this chapter showed that the antagonism some of the men feel is a minority view. Most Mbendjele men say that women performing is a good thing, and that they enjoy the humour, theatrics and sexiness of the women. The following ethnographic vignette emphasises men’s role in the happening of women’s performances, and shows that men are actively engaged in women’s take-over.

During one evening in a forest camp (Makana, December 2014), the women started playing casually. A nice moon light enabled us to play *massana* in circle, singing and dancing. We were having fun playing *anasí*, and we laughed a lot. After a while, Eudia, a twenty-year-old man made a comment addressed to the whole camp. He said that women were doing ‘childish *massana*’ (*massana ndenge baana ba kia*), when they could do women’s *massana* (*massana ya baito*) instead. Nyemu and his brother Mbio laughed at the comment, and urged the women to call their

*mokondi*. After a few minutes of general confusion among the players, women decided to sit down together and started singing. The teenage girls (from 12 to 15 years old) are the ones who are expected to begin the singing, as their voices are strong, loud, and they have energy to spend on singing. It follows that forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) often start with the most popular songs among teenagers, who particularly enjoy famous *Bolobe* songs<sup>61</sup>. Soon though, an elder woman started singing a song from the *Dgoku* repertoire, and that's how *Dgoku* began that evening. This sudden beginning reflects men's pleasure and enjoyment of the women's spirit, even though sometimes they may feel insulted by the songs.

Because we were in a forest camp, men had to take care of the safety of women's performance. The spirit they were calling was not known to everyone around, so the men had to make sure no one could see this *Dgoku mokondi*. They secured each path to the camp, and kept a sharp eye and ear to avoid being surprised by a visitor.

When men had to move around the camp, they would make large detours to avoid disturbing the women's performance. An *Dgoku* was dancing in and out of the camp, surrounded by women dancing and singing. Men stayed hidden in the shadows of their houses or in the forest. Still, men were looking carefully at women's performance, and they did not hesitate to encourage women with sharp comments. They would openly make fun of the way a particular woman would dance or sing or laugh, and women were laughing about men's comments themselves.

In *Dgoku* performances each individual has a specific role to play as the member of an age and/or gender group, and is expected to play this role. Some comments made during a performance are about the fact that an age group is not playing her role properly. During that *Dgoku* evening, men laughed about the way some teenagers were dancing, but they enjoyed the performance, and did not try to disturb it at any moment.

At the beginning of the performance, women sat down around a couple of elders who had started to sing songs from the *Dgoku* repertoire. They sang gently in sweet voices and slowly, until all the women of the camp were gathered and singing. Then a few of them stood up and gathered in a line, holding each other's shoulders, and

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<sup>61</sup> *Bolobe* is a men's spirit, though all join in, it is one of the most often performed spirits in Mbendjele communities. In Bonguinda, *Bolobe* performances were the most frequent spirit play during my time there.

moving forward crossing the camp -*Dgoku's* emblematic dance movement. Because they walked in rhythm, leaning on one leg more than on the other in an asymmetric way they sang songs at a fast tempo, mostly containing two parts in counterpoint with little improvisation, as opposed to four parts songs in which singers enjoy more freedom. The songs including complex dance movements are usually simple in their construction, while songs which do not require any dance are structurally more complex and open to improvisation. Women themselves seized a plastic container and took care of the drums.

After dancing for a while, women came back to the elders who had remained sitting. Women sang slow and gentle songs, and the *Dgoku mokondi* started to make its voice heard while the women kept singing. Women would alternate songs (*eboka*) and speech songs (*esime*), the latter being faster and half spoken, with only two singing parts. Then, a few women went in the forest, to their sacred tree, in order to bring back the *Dgoku mokondi*. Some of the women had stayed in the camp, still alternating sitting together singing polyphonic songs with moments of dance and *Dgoku's* games.

Finally, the women who had gone to the sacred tree came back to the camp, surrounding and protecting the *Dgoku mokondi*. The latter would evolve bended, covered with a cloth, singing in its specific voice. Mungwo's *mokondi* is quite shy, in the sense that it refuses to come in the camp without being completely surrounded by women, who pay great attention not to let it be seen by men and children. This *mokondi* would not come close to anyone, and would go back to the forest often, before coming back again. While the spirit danced, women stayed gathered -apart from the women who protect it-, sitting in one place, without dancing as long as the spirit was in the camp. Sometimes, while the spirit was in the forest, its voice could be heard on top of the women's singing.

The performance went on for a few hours, the spirit coming and going, always surrounded closely by women. Sometimes, women would dance while the spirit was in the forest, then go back to the forest to bring the spirit in the camp again.

Suddenly, everybody stopped singing and stood perfectly still. The faint light of a flashlight had been seen by one of the men; someone was approaching. We did not know who it was, though he was clearly following a path leading to the camp. The

women had to stop *Dgoku* immediately, as this *Dgoku mokondi* cannot be seen by a stranger in these conditions i.e. at night and in a forest camp. But everyone was in a mood for *massana*, and the moon was still shining on the camp. So people decided to perform *Bolobe* instead. The visitor was a man coming from Bonguinda (from a different clan), and was initiated to the same *Bolobe mokondi* as the men of the camp. For the rest of the night people performed *Bolobe*, and did not speak a word of the *Dgoku* performance which had just happened.

This *ethnographic vignette* illustrates well the degree of secrecy that surrounds some *Dgoku mokondi* in the forest. The ambiance was very relaxed when the spirit was dancing, though as soon as a stranger approached the camp, everything had to stop. The men will never be initiated to *Dgoku*, as it is a women spirit. They are not taught *Dgoku* secrets. But the men from the clan, in a way, participate to the performance by protecting the spirit from being seen by inappropriate eyes. They are part of women's performance as the necessary audience of active viewers and as they encourage women by their comments and jokes.

### **Concluding remarks**

Forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) allow Mbendjele society to share its collective forces and socially valued emotions among appropriate groups in society. By allowing men, women and children to takeover in turns, each gets to experience its power and role in society as a key component group. The act of performing is at the heart of the construction, maintenance and resilience of Mbendjele's egalitarian system. Forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) ensure the construction of gendered solidarity and share power to each gender.

During forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*) men or women's, intra-gender solidarity is a necessary component to ensure success. Even if some conflicts or disagreements occur within gender groups, spirit play makes people seek to value and establish a strong feeling of solidarity. As no one can force someone to do anything, people have to decide for themselves to participate and so the role of

pleasure, joy and *communitas* established in each spirit play is crucial to their cultural continuity and ensuring people continue to want to perform them.

When a small number of people try to perform forest spirit rituals (*mokondi massana*) without inviting the whole community to join, it is insulting to the rest of the community. Once a family that was in conflict with the rest of the community began to perform *Bolobe* on their own, without inviting others to join them. After a few minutes, an elder woman came and insulted them, saying that this was not a proper way of performing, and that this should not happen. Saying they were nothing more than gorillas, she took the drums away to stop the performance!



**Plate 14:** Women often wear seasonal flowers during *Dgoku* rituals (Bonguinda, January 2014)



**Figure 54:** At the end of the ritual, elder women made everyone laugh by dancing in funny ways



**Figure 55:** During a *Dgoku* performance, women branches to carve penis and carried them between their legs, mimicking men's erection (Indongo, September 2014).



**Figure 56:** During a *Dgoku* performance, women mimicked sexual intercourse (Indongo, September 2014).



## Chapter 6:

### The egalitarian community

Create beauty and restore order through performance

#### Introduction

From an early age, the Mbendjele learn and feel the need of *massana*. In the previous chapter, I showed that genders use *massana*'s world (*mokili ua massana*) to communicate with each other and to balance the forces of power within the community. But I also showed that the Mbendjele praise *massana* above all for its ability to bring joy to the world. Through performative means, individuals aim at reaching a trance-like state of euphoria, a profound feeling of joy, a state that can only be attained through the performative action of *massana*. The 'world of *massana*' can thus be considered as a unique space for the community to regulate its needs.

If some collective joys such as children's games are built around individual's free-will, in other occasions individuals are compelled to perform together to bring joy to the community. While the Mbendjele's egalitarian system is based on each individual's autonomy, social pressure can act as a powerful tool to influence individuals' actions. Chapter 1 showed that in Mbendjele discourse sharing is something that individuals do willingly, but the decision to share can be forced on

individuals if necessary. Social pressure acts in various domains of society, and influences collective and personal decisions.

In this chapter, I therefore start by providing an example of a beautiful *massana* performance in order to identify the optimum conditions for producing and circulating a collective state of profound joy. I then move on to demonstrate that the Mbendjele egalitarian system depends on *massana* to regulate social life by providing an example of how personal decisions are shaped by the needs of the community.

### **Beautiful performances: a *Matāŋga* in Sendébumu**

In December 2013, Dāŋga -a very old and respected lady- died in her village of Sendébumu. Before she passed away she had been very weak for several months, hardly being able to leave her bed. She was blind and without strength but her mind was sharp until the very end. I had been lucky enough to meet her on a few occasions, each time I would come to Sendébumu. She had always been nice to me and would recognize me anytime I would visit. She was the mother, grandmother or great grandmother of almost everyone in the village of Sendébumu. Ai was a distant relative of Dāŋga's family, and Dāŋga's daughter was one of her best friends. Sendébumu being just a couple of hours walk from Bonguinda, I would accompany Ai regularly to visit her friends in Sendébumu.

The news of Dāŋga's death came to me while I was staying with Nyemu and his family in Makana, a fishing camp. A few days later, we were back in Bonguinda. Dāŋga's daughter sent the news that a commemoration ceremony (*Matāŋga*) would be celebrated the next day. Nyemu and Ai decided that we should go to the ceremony; as did many people in Bonguinda. Considering Dāŋga' status of "great elder" (*kombeti a bole*), the commemoration ceremony was a promise of great performances. By the time we arrived in Sendébumu, Dāŋga had already been buried.

The day of the commemoration (*Matāŋga*) we left Bonguinda around 9 AM, after a quick breakfast. When we arrived in Sendébumu Ai hastily said hello to people on

her way before going to Dǎnga's home. All the grandmothers (*kokobar*) had assembled. Ai fell into the arms of Dǎnga's daughter and they both began to cry heavily. The grandmothers then started singing a lament, in deep, bass voices, the singing interrupted regularly by sobs. This lament was beautiful but I did not have the heart to make any recording or video of it. The moment was very emotional, and I found myself crying as well. The lament seemed to be designed to let deep emotions go out, and everyone was affected by the songs. During my time in the RoC, three people that I knew died. And each time, the lament was the only moment during the commemoration ceremonies in which people would allow themselves to express sadness and sorrow. The rest of the ceremony is a celebration, and people's actions switch from inducing sadness to creating joy, laughter and happiness.

As people arrived from the villages of Bonguinda and Mombelu, they joined the people of Sendébumu and everyone gathered in front of Dǎnga's house. Women started to sing *Bolobe* songs and soon *Bolobe's* mother (*ngoye a Bolobe*) came to sing and dance.

After a couple of hours of *Bolobe* singing, *Libongu* (lit. "the waterfront") arrived. *Libongu* is the group of initiated men that carry *Edjɛŋgi* into the village and let everyone know that the greatest spirits of all is coming to dance. They danced and sang for a few minutes on the main square before going back to the forest in order to call the *Edjɛŋgi* spirit. During *Libongu's* passage, *Bolobe* singing hardly broke off. Voices and drums just went quieter while *Libongu* was there, and they went up again as soon as *Libongu* began to leave the square. Once the singing was very energetic, *Bolobe* spirits began to appear. First one spirit, then two, then four until finally eleven *Bolobe* spirits were dancing. Considering the importance of the event, everyone was doing their job very conscientiously and enthusiastically. After a couple of hours of *Bolobe* spirit dancing, the men brought a log drum which announced *Edjɛŋgi's* arrival. The *Bolobe* spirits went back to the forest and everyone took a well deserved break.

After twenty minutes we heard children shouting as they rushed to the square, running and laughing. We then knew that *Edjɛŋgi* was coming. When *Edjɛŋgi* runs around the village, little children often get scared and go back to their mothers. Men started an *Edjɛŋgi* song and women followed. *Edjɛŋgi* arrived and danced for a few

hours, alternating between coming to dance in the square and going back to men's sacred path (see plate 15).

During this commemoration ceremony, the quality of the singing and dancing were astounding, and people talked about it for a long time afterwards as being a wonderful performance. I made some videos of that performance, and even months after it people kept asking me to show them the video again. I also put some recordings on a SD card so that they could play it on radios. It was one of Nyemu's greatest joys to listen back to this performance' songs and remember what a great performance it had been.

The performance went so well that people got a bit too excited after a few hours. *Edjɛŋgi* was becoming more and more agitated, and women would not always control themselves. All of a sudden, *Edjɛŋgi* rushed towards women who got scared and ran away. Dǎŋga's daughter was cooking behind the square, and when women tried to run away from the frightening *Edjɛŋgi* spirit, they knocked down one of the pots filled with food. Dǎŋga's daughter was of course very upset and both elder women (*kombeti*) and men firmly reproached women of not behaving properly, and of ruining the performance (*bune botiya bune kia kilikili! Bune mbese mɛndɔ ko!* i.e. "You are so bad-mannered! You are ruining the thing here!"). Despite this unfortunate episode, the performance resumed and *Edjɛŋgi* danced again. Finally, the spirit went back to the forest and everyone got some rest.

As with all commemoration ceremonies, people came from the surrounding villages to participate (Bonguinda, Mombelu, Mbanza, and Bangui-Motaba), and the *Matǎŋga* performances lasted for several days. People thus had to be fed, and it was Dǎŋga's daughter's role to cook for them. Lots of food had thus been prepared, and at the end of the afternoon the food was distributed. I could see that Dǎŋga's daughter was quite stressed as many people were there and she was anxious that she would not have enough food for everybody. She used large *ŋgongo* leaves to distribute the food to groups of friends or families that came together. Men would eat in small groups of friends while women would eat with their children. Dǎŋga's daughter had prepared pounded manioc leaves with palm oil and salt (*djabuka*), edible leaves with fish (*koko na shuwe*) and cassava (*lǎŋga*). When Mbio and Mongi received their *ŋgongo* leaf filled with food, they called me so that I could eat with them. There was

enough food for all of us and we really enjoyed Dǎŋga's daughter's cooking. Mbio and Mongi were delighted with her generosity as all the dishes were salty (*ngai*) and oily. Mbendjele people love palm oil and salt which are both village products that they do not necessarily possess in large amounts. When living in the forest, people can complain about food being dull and without enough oil (*bokau/ tabitabi*). People were thus very happy about the way the whole performance had been handled by Dǎŋga's family.

Food is an important part of the performance process. If people are not fed during *Matǎŋga* performances, they will probably leave sooner and blame the organizers for not doing things properly. I remember one *Matǎŋga* performance that we went to, Mateke (Ai's mother) and I, during which no food was distributed and we came back as empty as we had come. "The spirits danced with hunger, that's bad you see!" (*Mokondi abina na nzala! Ebe ta!*), said Mateke on our way back. With her daughter Mélanie, they kept complaining all the way and once back to camp, they told everyone how the spirits had been hungry at this *Matǎŋga* performance and how bad she thought it was. At the end of the first day of Dǎŋga's funerals, we had to go back to Bonguinda as we planned to go fishing in the forest, but many people stayed in Sendébumu for the night. Mbio came back with us, and told me that Munyabe had planned to let his *Bolobe* spirit dance in Sendébumu in the evening. The next day, another *Edjɛŋgi* was held, as well as several *Dgɔku* performances.

During this *Matǎŋga*, people had been very cooperative, and managed to create beauty and positive emotions in such a way that they experienced profound moments of joy, pleasure and collective communion. People remembered and described these performances as optimal *massana*. This shows that Dǎŋga's *Matǎŋga* achieved the level of cooperation and aesthetic beauty that the Mbendjele of Bonguinda are aiming to achieve in every forest spirit performance (*mokondi massana*). People can reach a state of profound happiness through music and dancing techniques, and individuals' knowledge associated with spirits' ways of performing are considered intellectual property. Contrary to all material goods, which



are shared freely among the community, intellectual property is traded with cash and goods.

This aspect of ritual trading in Mbendjele society echoes Gell's concept of "technology of enchantment", as "it is the difficulty of making and access to an object which makes it valuable" (Gell 1992). As ritual procedures, song repertoires and dance styles are highly appreciated knowledge in Mbendjele society, it follows that the acquisition of these technologies of enchantment is difficult and expensive to acquire. Beauty through the performance of forest spirit rituals is one of the most expensive and valued things produced in Mbendjele society, and this status relates to the efficacy of beautiful performances. Gell showed that art objects are 'difficult to make, difficult to "think"', and that 'they fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator' (1998: 23). The power of fascination of forest-spirit performances is an integral part of the Mbendjele definition of beauty. Similarly to the Sulka of Melanesia, the Mbendjele consider that beauty resides both in the performance efficacy and in the technical competence it shows. Derlon & Jeudy-Ballini demonstrated that, for the Sulka, "beauty is an accomplishment grounded both in human technical competence and in the help of the spirits. Through the magic they perform, the men building the masks can benefit from the assistance of ancestral spirits. When achieved, beauty can thus be seen as an expression of a cosmological agreement" (Derlon & Jeudy-Balini 2010: 138). Similarly, forest spirits are attracted to human space by beautiful singing and by the performers' mystical force (*gundu*). Beauty in Mbendjele conception also refers to the relationship people entertain with their environment, including the supernatural world. Beauty is dependent on the technical competence of the performers on one hand, and on the quality of their relations with their environment (the forest) and with forest-spirits on the other hand.

The profound moments of joy and pleasure produced by a beautiful performance correspond to the concept of *communitas* developed by Turner. Olaveson defines *communitas* as "a state of equality, comradeship, and common humanity, outside of normal social distinctions, roles, and hierarchies" (2001: 93). Turner describe the experience of *communitas* as usually "deep" or intense (1995) which corresponds to Mbendjele descriptions of beautiful moments during a performance. Each time Nyemu played the recordings I had made of Sendébumu's performance, people



always marvelled at the beauty of the singing, and recalled the pleasure and joy they had felt. They for example said: “My God, we know how to sing!” (*Komba! Buse eba embedi ta!*), “What a great joy” (*Esɛŋgo ike!*), “Oh! The women they danced so well!” (*Ya! Baito bamubuka ndjo!*).

Edith Turner defined *communitas* as “a group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences with one’s fellows” (2012: 2), and for the Mbendjele, this process of “sharing common experiences” extends to the environment, the forest and its inhabitants, the forest-spirits, the animals and human beings.

As described in this thesis, a beautiful performance is a very difficult thing to obtain. Many things can influence people’s willingness to cooperate sufficiently to produce this level of beauty. Sometimes, people do not cooperate, which can have dramatic consequences. The next section provides an example of how people’s inability to cooperate and share according to the rules of *ekila* threatened the well-being and survival of the community, and how this situation was dealt with.

### **Restoring order and harmony in the community: *Mobema* performance**

In April 2014, things were not going very well in the village of Bonguinda. Several accusations of sorcery had been made, and the traditional healer (*ŋgāŋga*) found some incriminating pieces of evidence (an animal’s bone in the child’s throat) during a healing ceremony. This has to do with Macia’s marriage. Macia is a young lady who fell in love with a married man, Telo. Telo would like to marry her too, and become polygamous (*mbānda*: a marriage between a man and two women) as he already has a wife that he does not want to leave. Yet the three families involved do not seem to consent to this union. Macia’s brothers and mother are worried. They say that a *mbānda* only brings troubles. In their opinion, Telo is not going to be able to take care of Macia properly as he already has a wife and two children to take care of. Telo’s first wife, Andzoma, does not want to share Telo with another woman. Further, Macia is young and very beautiful, younger than Andzoma. Andzoma’s mother supports her daughter, and keeps coming to Macia’s mother to insult her and threaten her, trying as hard as she can to dissuade her from supporting Macia and Telo’s union.

Nyemu belongs to Macia's clan, and he did not seem to be very happy about this union either. "Polygamy is a being of dark magic" (*mbānda adie moto a likundu*) he told me while Andzoma's mother was shouting at Macia's. Nyemu is a very wise and respected man (*konja/kombeti*), so he did not hesitate to make several *mosāmbō* (public speeches) about this issue. Lewis noted that an individual speaking during *mosāmbō* "is expected to express what most people think or want to do anyway" (Lewis 2014: 232). Nyemu therefore asked people to keep calm, and to stop insulting each other. He said that the marriage issue brought too much trouble to the village (*mendo adie na kbwi, adie mobe*). He asked people to be polite, and to stop accusations of sorcery, and emphasized the fact that people should be doing *massana* instead of fighting each other.

Indeed, a *Bolobe* performance that had been held earlier that week had been very bad, and people had been talking about how horrible this performance had been. Because of Macia and Telo's marriage, the women of the three families refused to sit next to each other during the *Bolobe* performance. Instead, they sat in three groups far apart from each other. When one group would start a song, another group would start a different song at the same time which resulted in a singing of quite poor quality. After a couple of hours the *Bolobe* spirits went back to the forest, refusing to dance in these conditions.

The next day, I went on a trip in the forest to look for honey with Nyemu, his little brother Monoi and Monoi's friend Eudia. On our way, they complained about the way the women had behaved the night before. "They were all sitting in separated groups, it is not possible like this!" ("*badie ka na équipe équipe* [French], *edi koka te!*"). They all deplored the fact that this marriage problem was affecting the whole community. Because they could not perform *massana* properly, then it meant that the community was in serious trouble. I could see that this was really affecting them personally, even though they were not directly concerned by the marriage issue. We did not find any honey that day and came back empty handed after a four hours walk.

During the next few days, the ambiance in the whole village was very tense. On top of it all, people were getting hungry. Food was becoming hard to find, and the men could not find any honey. They would find honeycombs, but the honey was dry and the bees fierce. The *Dgɔku* spirit was angry too. A big *Dgɔku* had been held, and

women did a great job during a whole afternoon. Because it was Modiembe's *Dgɔku*, it required to be fed. This means that the day following a big *Dgɔku* performance, the young women should go in the forest to look for wild yams (*mela*) and edible leaves (*koko*) to feed all the women who participated in the performance. It is the spirit-guardian's responsibility to give food to all the women. But the women did not manage to get enough food to give a plate to everyone. The ones who did not get anything complained loudly and accused Modiembe (the *Dgɔku* spirit-guardian) of refusing to share with them (*akia buse!*). Modiembe replied that they were disrespecting her *Dgɔku* spirit, and that she would not allow them to perform it here ever again.

This incident was connected to the conflict around Macia and Telo's marriage, as were the lack of good *massana* performances, the accusations of sorcery and the lack of food as the negative sounds emanating from the fights and arguments had closed the village to the forest's resources. The situation started to get almost unbearable for everybody in the village. Polygamy is regarded as problematic in Mbendjele society, and people recommend avoiding it (Lewis 2002: 74). People's strong opposition of Telo and Macia's marriage is grounded in "an implicit condemnation of adultery, and an assertion of the moral value of monogamy and faithfulness" (*ibid.*: 122). Several *mokondi massana* songs evoke the problems which arise from a polygamous marriage and illustrate its moral status:

<i>Edjɛŋgi</i> song "Behind the marriage"	<i>Sima libala</i>
<i>Dgɔku</i> song "Food is a complicated matter in polygamy"	<i>Yoma e mbānda mobe</i>
<i>Bolobe</i> song "The problem of polygamous marriage"	<i>Likamboli</i> [lingala] <i>a mbānda</i>
<i>Bolobe</i> song "Polygamy misleads people"	<i>Mbānda akosa bato.</i>

The fact that polygamy is disapproved of is linked to Mbendjele's concern for the proper treatment of personal fluids, which are not to be mixed randomly. *Ekila* and its rules define how people must share "the body's vital forces, reproductive potential, productive activities and their products, moral and personal qualities, and emotions" (Lewis 2008: 299). Having sexual intercourse with several people endangers the group members' health, the safety of women and children in childbirth and child-rearing, as well as the success in hunting and gathering. Lewis related an observation made by Phata, a 65-years-old Mbendjele from the Sangha region:

“*Ekila* is something only for one person ... If you mix your *ekila* around with lots of people then, if you’re a man, your hunting is ruined (*matena*). A woman has problems in childbirth (*ekondi*), and her infants get weak and ill” (Lewis 2008: 298).

Polygamy is thus recognised by the Mbendjele to ‘ruin’ people’s *ekila*. Telo was ‘ruining’ the village’s *ekila* since people failed to find food: the forest had closed itself to the people of Bonguinda.

The elders (*konḡa*) discussed that matter together, and decided to send the young Fumba to speak a *mosāmbō*. In the evening, around 7PM, Fumba asked everyone not to go to work the next day but to stay in the village. He insisted on the fact that everybody had to be there (*bato bese tout* [French]!). Not a single person should stay out of it. At that point, Nyemu, who was sitting next to me as we both listened to Fumba, told me that I should be there too. Fumba then explained that we should all do a healing ritual (*beboka ya ḡḡāḡa*) to resolve this situation.

The next morning, Fumba gathered his friends, and from 6AM they started to go around the village, singing about the coming of the *Mobema* spirit. Fumba had a whistle that he used to encourage his mates. The songs they chose were a surprising mixture of Mbendjele songs on a pentatonic scale, church songs with the typical third and fifth cord, military body movements, interrupted by French sentences such as “-*Vous êtes fatigués? – Non!*” (“-Are you tired? -No!”). The lyrics of the songs formulate the problem and advocate people to listen and participate. “Death mother, we see death” (“*liwa mama, botala liwa* [Lingala]”), “You will listen to this problem” (“*okoyoka likambo* [Lingala]”). Macia and Telo’s mothers were arguing about their children while Fumba and his friends were going around the village singing. After about half an hour of singing, they quickly went in the forest to fetch fire wood and made a big fire. Usually, when a spirit performance is held in Bonguinda, it happens on the spirit owner’s plot as Bonguinda is a large village. For *Mobema*, they chose the big square which is where all the official meetings with *Bilo* or white people are held. *Mobema*’s performance was thus held on neutral public ground (see figure 57).

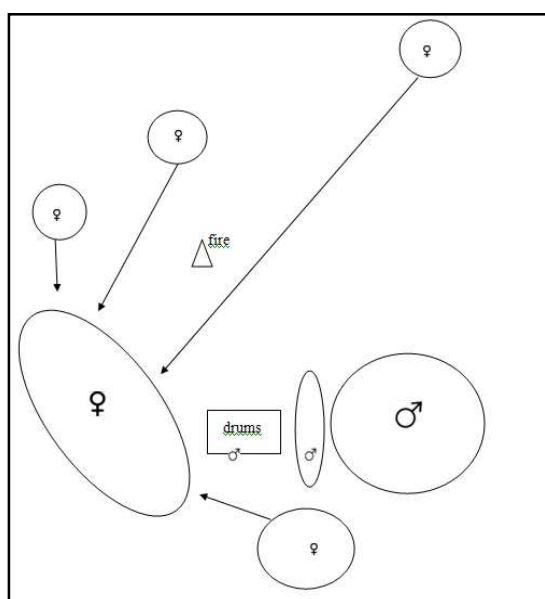
The elders (*konḡa*) came to sit down while the healer waited for more people to come. Once at least half of the people were gathered in the square, the healer (*ḡḡāḡa*) asked people to cooperate so that things could get better. He reminded

everyone that they were facing a situation that needed to be addressed. “You should go to each family group, right to the end of the village. They found honey. Don’t you all want to eat honey?” (“*buse dwa équipe équipe* [French] *tee, suka mboka. Bakengwa bwi. Buse di dia bwi te?*”). The healer was reminding people that the *Ekila* rules which emphasise sharing needed to be respected to avoid problems. No one should be forgotten, and everyone, from one side of the village to the other, should share properly with all. If people were not able to cooperate, it was not surprising that they were getting hungry. All the anger and bad feelings that came out of the village lately had ‘ruined’ the village’s *ekila* and the forest was therefore closed. Even the *Bolobe* spirits refused to come and dance.

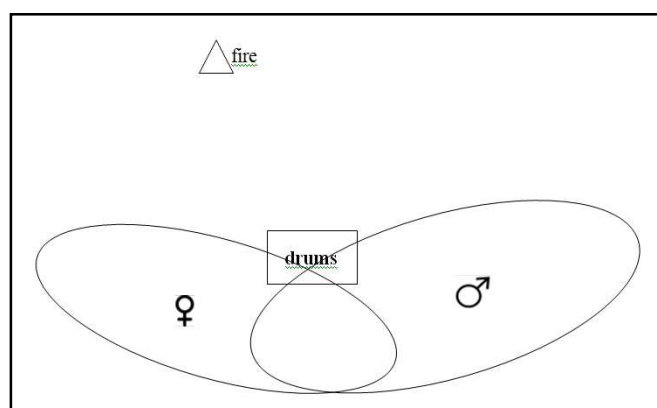
For a few minutes, the elders made their best to gather everyone. Only two old people that could not walk were left alone. Everyone else was kindly but firmly asked to join the ritual. After a bit of confusion, the singing could finally start. Elder women chose the songs and taught them to the young ones who did not know them, demonstrating that this *massana* was not often performed. The men were in charge of the drums, and the healer was standing up in the middle, or sitting with the elders (*konga*), as shown in figure 16.1.

**Plate 16:** Staging of a *Mobema* performance

**Figure 16.1:** At the beginning of the performance, women were sitting in several groups, far apart from each other. The healer (*ngānga*) made great efforts to convince them to join the main group.



**Figure 16.2:** After a few hours, everyone, men and women were sitting together in one group.



Suddenly, a rain shower interrupted the performance. Fumba tried to keep the energy going by singing with his friends, though the rain dissuaded people to continue. “Let’s wait for the sun to come back. We will do it tomorrow.” (“*Babonda li dadi aufa. Bakia na kutu*”) said a woman. There was a brief discussion between the ones who wanted to continue and the ones who wanted to reschedule, then everyone went home. A few young girls went around singing *Dgoku* songs, as *Dgoku* is a water spirit that comes out when it rains. But a few minutes later the rain stopped. People came back in small groups, little by little, and after about one hour the whole village was there and the singing continued. *Mobema* spirit performance has a repertoire of songs for each stage of the performance. Songs to make the problem public and to advocate people to join in (such as Fumba and his friends did), songs to start the main phase of the performance (here chosen by the elder women), songs to treat the problem, songs to end the main phase of the performance, and songs for the ending of the performance called *kāmbaso* (see table 8).

**Table 8:** *Mobema* performance’s structure.

PART 1: CALL	PART 2: TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM																PART 3: KāMBASO
	START		MAIN													END	
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	A	C	E	C	A	F	D	A	

**Legend:**

A = *ngānga*’s speech

B = “The healer’s daughter” (*moona mwasi ngānga*)

C = “We see sorcery here” (*buse likundu etata ko*)

D = “Iyaya wraps her honey in a packet » (*Iyaya abuka maboke*)

E = “The squirrel does not play with the leopard” (*esende a di sakana na Embongo*)

F = “My wild yam” (*ya ngondo efa āngamu*)

G = “He/she hurt my mother” (*amombela ngoye*)

The elder women chose another song, “the healer’s daughter” (*moona mwasi ngānga*), which most of the women follow. Though the women first sat in several groups far apart from each other (see figure 16.1). While the singing of *moona mwasi ngānga* went on, the healer slowly went to each group, and gently took the women by the hand to move them to sit together with the main group of women. The elder men (*konḡa*) were trying to help the healer by telling the women to join

physically, and to come together so that they could unite their efforts and demonstrate their collective cooperation.

Munyabe is Macia's elder brother. As their father died, he is now the male head of the family. He went over to one of the small groups of women, which were from Telo's family sitting on the opposite side of the square. Munyabe asked the women to sit with the main group. "You are sitting too far away" (*bune badie mosika*). "Come on, people are sitting over there" (*yaka bato badie musiki ngg*) he said. "I don't want to go, there is too much sun" (*Ah! Dika li dadi adie va*) answered one of the women. Other women took Munyabe's side and tried to convince their friend to join the main group. "Come on, let's get closer to them" (*ta vea basukana*), they said. The woman continued to resist, saying that there was definitely too much sun. Munyabe indicated her a shaded spot under a tree that would get them much closer. The woman argued that there were no space under that tree as the drummers used it all (*bapia bandumu va*). Finally, her friends took her by the arm and they all went to the spot Munyabe had showed them. As they crossed the square towards the main group, the drummers sensitively moved to make some space without being asked by anyone.

Women would also call out to the small groups. "Come here! Don't stay apart like that! Move away from there! It cannot work if you stay over there!" (*Ma vea na te! Bune bānga ngwene. Bune die ka na équipe* [French] *enda akoka na bodi ka ngwene!*). "Won't you come out?" (*bune ufa na te?*) said another women. Sometimes people from the main group would be listened to, and sometimes they would simply be ignored. Nevertheless people kept trying until everyone joined. The persons that resisted most stubbornly finally got convinced by the healer. He came silently to them, took them by the hand, and crossed the square toward the main group before sitting them down very gently. During all that time, the singing went on and did not stop to wait for people to move or to speak. All the discussions were done on top of the singing. After about one hour all the men and women of Bonguinda were sitting tight together in a dense group, facing the fire (see figure 16.2).

As the performance went on, people kept arguing about the way things should be done. At the beginning of the performance, the women were starting the songs and therefore deciding which one should be done. Men complained and wanted to start the songs themselves in tandem with the healer (*ngānga*). People also argued about

the choice of songs, about who should be standing and who should be sitting down. To every dispute or disagreement a solution or compromise was found in such a way that the performance continued without disturbance.

In the main part of the performance, the problem is treated (see table 8). This part lasts for several hours, though only five songs have been used for this performance. “The healer’s daughter” (*moona mwasi ngānga*), “we see sorcery here” (*buse likundu etata ko*), “lyaya wraps her honey in a packet » (*lyaya abuka maboke*), “The squirrel does not play with the leopard” (*esende a di sakana na embongɔ*), and “my young wild yam” (*ya ngondo efa angamu*).

Every now and then, the *ngānga* would make a speech, though it seemed to me that everyone was doing it as people kept contributing to the speeches with assertions, agreements and additional comments as they added something or approved vigorously what the healer was pointing out. During his speeches, the healer came in the middle of the square, and stand in between people and the fire. He said that honey was good, and that people should not walk on different paths to get the honey.

#### **Summary of the heaher (*ngānga*)’ speech during *Mobema* performance:**

<i>Tāmbi équipe équipe</i> [French] <i>te</i>	-We should not separated into different groups.
<i>Badwa na nja bo ka di moti</i>	We should walk the same path.
<i>Bato badia bwi</i>	People eat honey.
<i>Bune didia bwi te?</i>	Don’t you eat honey?
<i>le! Buse dia!</i>	-Yes, we do!
<i>Bwi adie bien</i>	-Honey is good.

Luckily, I participated in this performance at a time when I was beginning to be more fluent in Mbendjele so I could understand most of what was said during these speeches. His first address is a metaphor for what should ideally be going on among the people of Bonguinda rather than some advice on how to find honey. Honey is here used as a metaphor for the sweet things in life such as food, sex, song and laughter. The healer emphasised the importance of co-operation and sharing (‘walk the same path’) to ensure that people would enjoy ‘eating honey’, i.e. all the sweet things in life. During the healer’s speech, people supported his assertions by



contributing affirmations such as “yes that’s right” (*bona ke*) or “that’s good” (*c’est bon* [French]),

The healer then said “you people you ruin the situation by acting that way” (*bune bato bune mbese mendo*). Lewis showed that *ekila* practices and beliefs are not rigid as “people choose to follow, ignore, or transgress them according to the context they find themselves in” (Lewis 2008: 305). The healer emphasised the fact that people had made wrong choices and ignored *ekila* rules, and it followed that all of Bonguinda inhabitants now had to suffer the consequences -illustrating the strong belief that the actions of one have major consequences on the lives of all. The healer reinforced in his speech the value and importance of cooperation and sharing practices that both depend on a certain shared emotional space or atmosphere to exist. Sharing practices in Mbendjele society are structured and determined by *ekila* rules and polygamy contradicts the way individuals’ fluids should be shared. Indeed, “if either husband or wife inappropriately share their sexuality with others outside their marriage, both partners have their *ekila* ruined” (*ibid.*: 311). Telo was inappropriately sharing his sexuality with another woman, and his reluctance to cease this caused so much jealousy and anger that people no longer cooperated, nor shared food appropriately with each other. The consequences of his behaviour caused people’s anger and subsequent refusal to share to threaten the survival of the community.

In the healer’s speech, the difficulty to find food was directly linked to people’s failure to respect *ekila* rules since “difficulties in the food-quest or procreation are discussed in relation to *ekila* rather than to inadequacies in human skill or the environment’s ability to provide” (*ibid.*: 311). If people do not manage to cooperate and follow *ekila* rules, then they will be hungry as a consequence. The healer’s strategy to encourage people to cooperate was to emphasize all the good things which could happen if the emotional quality of the relations between people improved.

### **Summary of the healer (*ngānga*)’ second speech**

<i>Buse didie kudu te</i>	We are not tortoises.
<i>Tāmbi dia ka makombo ka makombo</i>	We cannot keep eating mushrooms.
<i>edikoka te</i>	It’s not enough.

*mbila bamo sila il faut* [French] *bato badia bwi.*

*batopai bune bosa mborogo na bwi*  
*bune somba simboki bune nua!*

*Il faut* [French] *bato bafofa :*

*“Bato o Banguinda badia bwi!*

*Bato o Banguinda tãmbi nzala !”*

*Amebo konja a bwi bane?*

*Konja a bwi bane?*

Palms nuts are finished, people must go for honey.

Men, you can sell honey and get money.

Then you can buy cigarettes and you'll smoke!

People need to say :

“In Banguinda, people eat honey!

In Banguinda, people are not hungry!”

I say, whose honey is it?

Whose honey is it?

During his last speech, the healer (*ngãnga*) took some dry honey that had been found the day before and that he had kept aside. It was the evidence supporting all he had said. The unavoidable truth was that the forest was closed to the people of Banguinda. He passed the dry honey around, so that everyone could spit on it (*mokele* i.e. ‘saliva’ is a blessing substance). I was asked to spit too. Once everyone on the square had spat on the dry honey, the latter was taken to the ones who were not there. It was two old people that were too weak to move and who stayed in their houses. Once they spat on it too, the dry honey was taken back to the square. Muniyabe took the dry honey while one of his friends took a bit of fire. Everyone then got on their feet and took some branches before following Muniyabe. That’s when the *kãmbaso* began. The *kãmbaso* is the last part of the *Mobema* performance. It is performed mainly by the youth, even though some older people participated too. Most of them though stayed behind while the youth went around with the dry honey.

During the *kãmbaso*, the same scene is played several times in each corner of the village. Muniyabe would take some bits of the dry honey and throw them in the bush. In the mean time, a few young men would simulate the honey harvest. One man would cut into a big chunk of wood with his axe, while another man would prepare a *djei*, some fire wrapped up in leaves to create a dense smoke. The men tried to make it as realistic as possible. They for example simulated being stung by bees or climbing up a tree. Even though this *mobema* performance was obviously a very serious matter, people had a lot of fun doing the *kãmbaso*, everyone was smiling and laughing. While the men were pretending to harvest honey, the rest of the people - men and women- got on their knees and, while singing, hit the ground with their branches (*mbundje*) in rhythm to purify the village. Bahuchet showed that the main function of flagellation is to purify something from evil forces (Bahuchet 1995: 62).

When going from one place to another, people would run in the same pace, and sing very loudly.

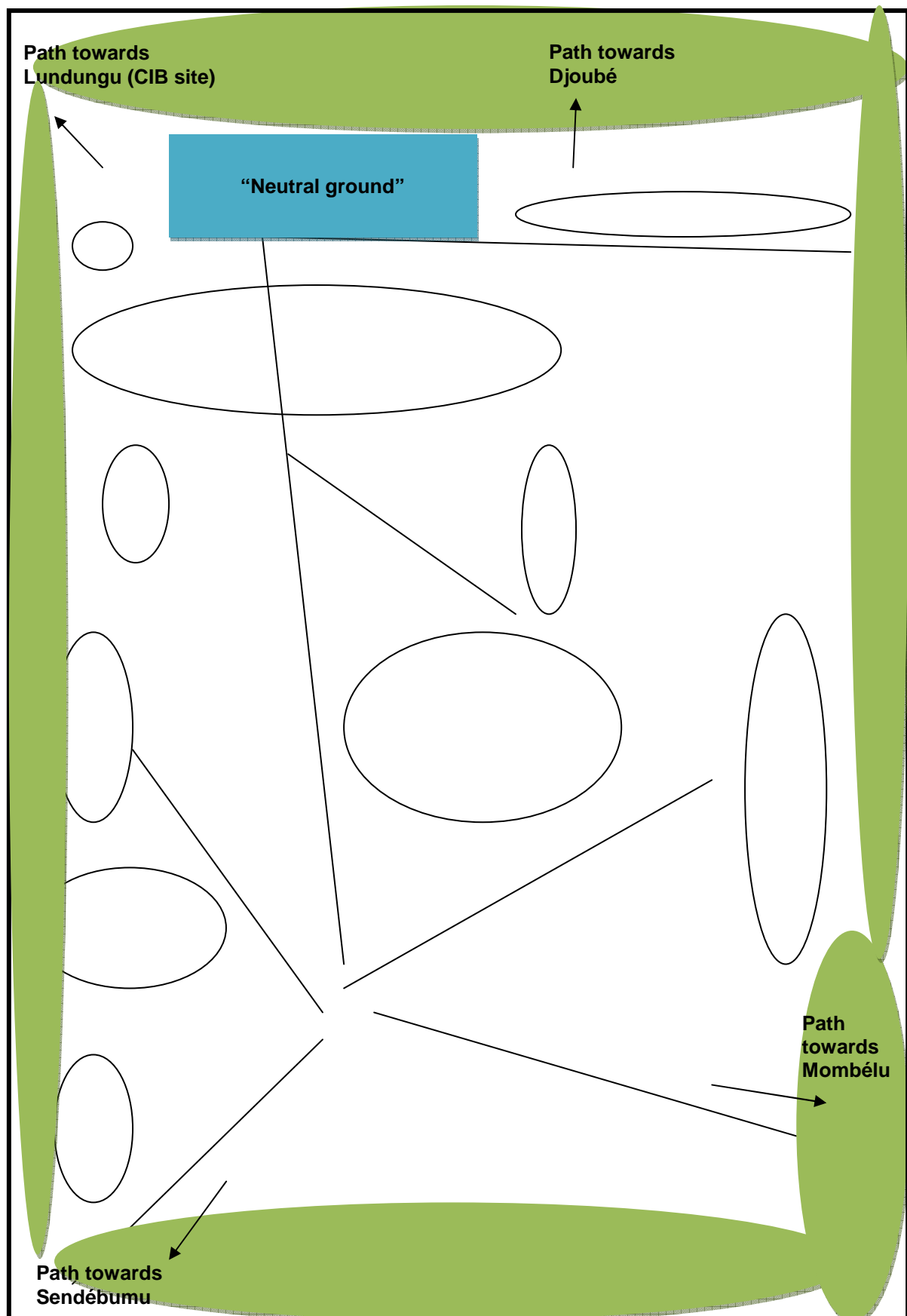
The performance ended when the procession arrived at the far end of the village. People entered the forest before throwing in the bush the dry honey, fire, chunk of wood and everyone's branches (*mbundje*). Then people used leaves to make "clap" sounds, and shouted very high pitch notes very loudly. The performance was ended; it was 4:30PM. *Mobema* had taken the whole day. People scattered, and hurried to go and take care of the evening meal before the sun went down.

When I left Bonguinda in July –three months later- Macia had gone to Pokola to visit relatives and had found a new lover. She returned to Bonguinda and her fiancé came to visit her parents. She was about to leave for Pokola soon.

**Plate 15:** *Edjengi* performance in Sendébumu (men and women are facing each other)



**Figure 57:** Plan of Bonguinda (year 2014)



**Legend:**



Beginning of the forest delimiting the village's borders.



'Neutral ground' on which the Mobema performance was held.



Grouping of houses according to kinship: Brothers and sister build their houses close to each other, and create 'neighbourhoods' in the village.



Most frequently used roads throughout the year.



Main paths leading to Bonguinda.

# Conclusion

## The Mbendjele emotional economy

The ethnography from an Mbendjele community presented in this thesis demonstrates the existence of an emotional economy on which the hunting and gathering economy - and therefore the healthy functioning of the society as a whole - depend.

Chapter 2 illustrated the high value the Mbendjele attribute to the production and sharing of positive emotions. Children are taught from an early age to actively participate to the environment of “good sounds” in the village or camp, and are often encouraged to share the joy and laughter coming out of their games with the whole community. The analysis of the Mbendjele processes of cultural transmission showed that *massana* activities teach children the value of cooperation by offering them opportunities to learn on a peer-to-peer basis and to participate in games built around cooperative rules.

Children also learn from their peers the techniques and skills of forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*). The analysis of the comments and advice given by parents and other adults during children's forest spirit performances showed that the emphasis is put on the production and sharing of a positive energy, on the precision of the dance movements, and on the attunement of the interactions with

other performers. Chapter 4 showed that during forest spirit performances (children's and adult's in which children participate too), the Mbendjele frequently demand-share music, joy, laughter, energy or dance as they ask for a performance ("people are in need of *massana*!"), a song ("give us a song!"), more energy ("dance with energy!") or a percussive section to show off dance movements ("give us an *esime* [percussive song section] so that I can dance [a women's dance movement]!"). Children are therefore taught to produce and share valued positive emotions, and the emphasis put on its value is manifest throughout adulthood as the management of emotions impacts the functioning of the society as a whole.

The ethnography presented in Chapter 2 also showed that, in the Mbendjele emotional economy, individuals' emotions are to be managed at a collective level. Using one of my personal experiences, the analysis demonstrated the collective nature of emotions as they are managed by the community and not by the individual. As individual and personal as they were, my negative emotions impacted the whole group, emphasising the absence in the Mbendjele conception of a delimited frontier between the bodily self and the social self in the domain of emotions. The exemple also illustrated the connection existing between the emotional economy and the food economy, as the production of negative emotions directly impacted the amount of food gathered. Because I was sad, the whole group did not catch fish.

This emotional economy (the management of individual emotions at a collective level, the healing of damaged emotions, the production and sharing of valued positive emotions) is of paramount importance for the efficient functioning of the hunting and gathering economy as the access to food and other resources depends in part on the proper production and management of positive emotions. The ethnography of the *mobema* forest spirit performance presented in chapter 6 illustrated how individuals' emotions directly impact the hunting and gathering economy as the sexual relationship and feelings of two individuals caused the whole community to suffer from the lack of food. The summaries of the healer speeches demonstrated the value and importance the Mbendjele attribute to cooperation and to the sharing of material and non-material products. As the situation threatened the well-being of the community, the healer highlighted the problems which needed to be solved to ensure the re-opening of Bonguinda, and therefore the access to the forest's resources. In the healer's speeches and in public speeches (*mosambo*)



concerned with the situation, people were urged to share properly according to *ekila* rules and to cooperate (“we should walk the same path”) and to properly manage their emotions (avoid fighting and arguments, participate in *massana*, share joy and laughter). The discourse highlights the creation of a certain shared emotional space or atmosphere which is necessary for the healthy functioning of the society as the access to the forest’s resources (including food) is dependent on this shared emotional space.

The emotional economy is concerned with the efficient sharing of valued non-material products such as music or emotions. Its existence is also manifest in the sharing of material products such as food, tools or other material objects. Through the analysis of ethnographic vignettes illustrating sharing practices, chapter 1 showed the limits of demand-sharing and social pressure (forced-sharing) as, in some situations, demands were refused, which caused problems in the group. The analysis demonstrated the existence of another type of sharing that I called ‘affective-sharing’ and which ensures that ultimately, even in the cases where demands are refused, affection is asserted, material products are shared and the individual’s needs are met.

The chapters 3, 4 and 5 focused on forest spirit performances (*mokondi massana*), and showed how valued non-material social products such as joy, music and laughter are produced and fairly shared among all present. The analysis of the music presented in chapter 3 demonstrated the awareness of performers to one another, and the constant adaptation of musicians to other performers’ aesthetic choices and needs. For instance, the drummers adapt their tempi to the singers, the singers adapt to the need of the dancers, and the dancers rely on the drummers to elaborate their performance. Several roles such as the song guides (*djamba*) or the drummers exist but each performer chooses to fulfil them or not, and many changes occur during the same performance.

The analysis of auditive aesthetics, and of visual aesthetics presented in chapter 4 demonstrated how an efficient emotional atmosphere is produced through techniques that inject energy into the performance, singing and dancing. The ethnography showed that the personality of the forest spirits (*mokondi*) has a direct impact on the nature of the emotional atmosphere produced, and determines the

nature of the emotions shared by the performers. The ethnography described the techniques used to manage emotions during a performance, as performers seek to reach euphoric states of joy. Through the practice of forest spirit performances, the Mbendjele seek joy and beauty and consider the sharing of valued non-material social products to be an achievement in itself, as the descriptions of the *matānga* performances presented in chapter 6 illustrated.

The energy, time and effort Mbendjele, like other BaYaka, put into *massana* activities illustrates the importance and high value they place on maintaining and managing the emotional life of the camp. This is not a frivolous or superficial issue, but emically perceived as central and crucial to the success of their hunting and gathering economy, child rearing and fertility. Sharing appropriate emotions amongst all present is as significant a preoccupation of the Mbendjele as is the sharing of meat or honey amongst all present. The specialised institution of *massana* deploys a sophisticated array of techniques to manage this economy such as polyphonic singing, theatrical antics or verbal encouragements. Despite the importance this has for BaYaka, the significance of the techniques and institutions for obtaining, producing and sharing valued emotions has not been attended to by anthropologists in the same way that material sharing has been. This thesis has addressed this by providing an ethnographic account of the ways in which this emotional economy is structured, operates and achieves outcomes in varied cultural areas – from managing gendered relationships, or addressing and resolving tensions, to levelling off political differences, establishing solidarity and shared identities, and ensuring that the forest and camp remain open to food.

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# Appendix

## 1. List of clips

N°	Title of video	Songs	Translation	Repertoire	Place of recording	Date	length
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### SHARED REPERTOIRES

1	Ancient twa songs 1	okose	'the lying'	unknown	DRC, Equateur region, Kondu-Kondu	01/2013	00 :57
2	Ancient twa songs 2	ya moenda	'my things'	unknown	DRC, Equateur region, Makila	01/2013	01:02

### MOKONDI MASSANA

3	Balé's call	ekeko buse kengwa ekeko	'Ekeko, we are looking for Ekeko'	Makuma	RoC, Likouala region, Bonguinda	04/2014	02 :01
4	Children learning			Mopepe	RoC, Likouala region, Bonguinda	2013/2014	04 :04
5	Dāmba's performance	Ø		Dāmba	RoC, Likouala region, Djoubé	06/2014	05 :08
6	Ekāmbaleki's performance			Ekāmbaleki	RoC, Likouala region, Djoubé	06/2014	06 :19
7	Building of energy in Bolobe performances			Bolobe	RoC, Likouala region, Bonguinda	12/2013	13:49
8	Lifting of mourning ceremony (Matānga)			Bolobe	RoC, Likouala region, Sendébumu	01/2014	09:03
9	Balé's Edjengi			Edjengi	RoC, Likouala region, Bonguinda	02/2014	15:18

### CHILDREN'S GAMES

10	The anasi game			anasi	RoC, Likouala region, Bonguinda and Djoubé	06/2014	01:35
11	The epatipati game	esobe	'savannah'	epatipati	RoC, Likouala region, Bonguinda	04/2014	01:08
12	The babubu game				RoC, Likouala region, Makana	11/2013	00:52

### OTHER MBENDJELE INSTITUTIONS

13	Traditional story-telling	Ufe, ufe, sukana	'come out, come out, come closer'	Gano	RoC, Likouala region, Makana	12/2013	01:34
14	Public mocking	Ø		Moadjo	RoC, Likouala region, Makana	11/2013	01:43

### SINGING TECHNIQUES

15	The yodel technique in lullabies	maεmba	'the handsome man'	Bolobe	RoC, Likouala region, Bangui-Motaba	04/2013	01:52
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		<i>nde bue</i>	'isn't it?'	unknown			
16	Fishing with flood barriers during the big rainy season			<i>Eboka efela</i>	RoC, Likouala region, Makana	11/2013	12:05

MELODIC INSTRUMENTS							
17	The harp <i>mondume</i>	<i>Bolingo</i>  <i>yaya boi?</i>	'love'  'elder brother, what's happening?'	<i>Mondume</i>  <i>Gano</i>	RoC, Likouala region, Bangui-Motaba RoC, Likouala region, Djoubé	04/2013 06/2014	05:07
18	<i>Lifulɛɛ</i> songs	Ø		<i>Lifulɛɛ</i>	RoC, Likouala region, Makana	12/2013	02:48
19	Game songs	<i>Ba tumoli</i> <i>bandjoi ebele</i>	'They've beaten by many bees'	Game	Roc, Likouala region, Makana and Bangui-Motaba; RoC, Sangha region, Ikelemba; DRC, Equateur region, Makila	2013/14	04:38

## 2. Explicative notes

1&2: When I made these videos, I did not know the meaning of these songs, neither the circumstance in which they were sung. It was only months after, while I was living among the Mbendjele in the RoC that I had been told by my friends that the song *okose* was meant to bring luck onto hunters before they leave camp. The second song *ya moenda* is a women's song, and might be –according to what Mbendjele women told me- linked to a women's spirit.

3: Balé uses this song to call his *Makuma* spirit, named *Ekeko*. In this recording, he is helped by his friends in Bonguinda, but most of the times, Balé told me that he calls *Ekeko* on his own and sings in the forest rather than in the village as in this recording. During the song recorded here, *Ekeko* came closer to the singers, but it did not enter human space and stayed at the edges of the village.

4. This video is a series of sequences which testify of the involvement of parents in children's learning of dancing and performative skills. The first sequence shows a newborn that is sung a lullaby. The second sequence shows toddlers encouraged to dance to the music of a musical bow (*game*). The last sequence shows a child performing *Mopepe*, a forest spirit only performed by young boys.

5: This *Dāmba* performance has been filmed in Bobanda, the Mbendjele neighbourhood of Djoubé, a *bilo* village. A few *bilo* joined to enjoy the performance. At the end, people were in a very playful mood, and started to play games, accompanied by the *mondume* harp and *Dāmba*'s dance.

6. This *Ekāmbaleki* performance has also been filmed in Bobanda. *Ekāmbaleki* plays with the women and children, as he constantly lead them to get closer before threatening them with its machetes and large penis.

7. The video shows how the energy is built during a *Bolobe* performance. This performance has been filmed during a quiet afternoon. Men got the support of the children, who helped them start the performance and convinced more people to join.

8. In this video, a family ends a period of mourning. A man had died about a year before, and since his death his wife, mother and sisters had been mourning by keeping the same clothes and not washing themselves. To organize the ceremony, the family had been helped by their *bilo*, who provided new clothes and beads for the women to be made pretty, as well as two bullets to celebrate the end of the mourning period.

9. This video is made of abstracts from a performance of Balé's Edjengi, described in chapter 4.

10. This video shows three sequences of the *anasí* game. The first sequence has been filmed in Bonguinda, as young girls were playing on a quiet late afternoon. The second and third sequences have been filmed in Bobanda, at the end of a *Dāmba* performance. People were in such a playful mood that they started playing games, including *anasí* which had a great success among participants. In the third sequence, men are contaminated by the girls' game, and they started to play their own version of the game, usually played by girls. At the end of the sequence, we can see the *Dāmba* spirit who happily dances among the players.

11. In this video filmed in Bonguinda, Annie, Tokabe and their friends play *epatipati*. In this game, the 'winner' is the one who does not laugh and remains silent. Of course all the fun resides in the fact that no one ever wins. The game then becomes a hand-clapping game, during which all the girls sing.

12. This video was filmed in the fishing camp Makana, as children played the *babubu* game. Children simulate being in a river boat, using their arms as paddles. Mwasi is standing beside them. The lyrics are as follows: -“Where?” –“Ahead!” –“Who stole my bananas?” – “It’s me!” –“Who stole my peanuts?” –“It’s me!” –“Who stole my wild yams?” –“It’s me!” –“Watch out! There’s a venomous worm at your feet!” At that point of the game, all the children get up and grab one foot in their hands while jumping on the other foot, simulating the pain caused by *ngɔngɔ*, a venomous insect.

13. In this recording, we can hear a short abstract of Monoi telling a gano story to entertain the camp in the evening (chapter 2).

14. *Moadjo* is a Mbendjele institution. This video shows two sequences of women doing *moadjo*, mocking individuals’ behaviours.

15. These recordings provide short examples of the yodel technique.

16. This video is meant to give a sense of the way music is used out of the world of *massana*. Fishing with flood barriers is a specific technique which requires manual skills, but also a good amount of singing to ensure success.

17. These two recordings show the *mondume* harp. The first one has been recorded in a forest camp in the Mondo forest, close to the village of Bangui-Motaba. It was a peaceful evening, and most of the people were lying in their beds. Men started to play the *mondume* harp to entertain the camp, and people stayed quiet to listen while children fell asleep. The song is called *bolingo* (‘love’), and tells the lament of a man to his father: “Father, the woman I love refused me. Love misled me.” (*taye āngamu, abia mɛ. Bolingo akosa mɛ*). The second recording is a song from the gano repertoire, during occasions when the harp *mondume* accompanies the story-teller.

18. During trips in the forest, Mbendjele men enjoy playing the *lifulele* flute. This video shows three sequences. In the first one, Monoi plays the flute up in a tree, so that the sound could be heard from a long distance. In the second sequence, Mbio plays a melody he invented, transcribed in chapter 3. In the third sequence, Eudia plays the flute while we walk back to our camp.

19. This video is composed of 4 sequences and shows the various uses and playing techniques of the musical bow *game*. In the first sequence, Monoi plays in a forest

fishing camp to entertain himself. As his daughter Embe started to dance, Monoi continued playing the *game* so that all the toddlers of the camp could have a chance to train their dancing. In the second sequence, men play to entertain themselves in the Mbendjele village Ikelemba. As the men play, children gather around and listen attentively to their music. The third sequence has been recorded in Bangui-Motaba, as men were relaxing in the village. Children gathered around the player and sang along. The last sequence has been recorded in the DRC, in Makila, where a musical bow of a different shape was used. Interestingly, the Batwa call their musical bow '*game*', the same word used by the Mbendjele who live thousands of kilometers west from the Batwa.